SINNERS

BY OWEN DAVIS

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"It was a Saturday night, just about dark, a little later than this."

SINNERS

A NOVELIZATION
OF OWEN DAVIS'S PLAY

BY

D. TORBETT

ILLUSTRATED WITH PHOTOGRAPHS OF
SCENES FROM THE PLAY

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SINNERS

CHAPTER I

IT did not need the dark circles around Hilda's somber eyes to "put Polly wise," as she would have expressed it, to the fact that her friend was in one of her black moods. They came and went at irregular intervals, without warning and, apparently, without reason. But shrewd little Polly had long ago figured out that in some way they were always connected with thought of a certain little town way up in New Hampshire which Hilda had once called "home."

As she had reason to know that Hilda never received any letters except from some of their men friends, and the regular crop of first-of-the-month bills, it did not need the gifts of a prophet or the daughter of a prophet to figure out that these fits of depression were the result of some chance encounter on the street, or in some shop or restaurant, with someone who had known her in her girlhood.

"Somebody ought to tell those yaps to stay on the farm where they belong, instead of gadding all the time to the city, and blowing in the money they make by their honest toil. Besides, it upsets Hilda, and that upsets Willy, and that

puts the kibosh on everything. Talk of the House that Jack Built!" grumbled Polly to herself. And for the thousandth time she thanked her gods that she had been brought up in an orphan asylum, which left one beautifully free from all early sentimental entanglements.

The one really soft spot in Polly's hard little heart was for Hilda. But as she was the least demonstrative person in the world, the only outward sign of affection that she ever permitted herself—except on rare occasions, and when they were alone—was more negative than positive. Of all their circle, Hilda was the only one who had never been pricked by that needle-like tongue. And Hilda, not needing to be told of her friend's loyal affection, returned it fourfold in the same way. And so, it came about that that rare thing, friendship between women, really existed in their case; which, considering the circumstances of their lives, was more than ever astonishing.

"Howdy!" said Polly briefly, as Hilda languidly drew her chair up to the table. "I'm deep in the Stock Market. By the time I've finished it, I won't have to go to any fortune-teller to find out whether Joe will come across with that bracelet I've been wanting this last week," and she hid her pretty, mischievous face behind the paper which she had already read.

Hilda gave a little murmur of acquiescence,

appreciating perfectly her friend's tactful recognition of her disinclination for conversation, and gave herself over to her own sad thoughts while mechanically sipping her chocolate. Polly's guess had been the right one. It was a face from down home that had awakened once more that old aching regret, all the more bitter because it was so vain, that ever gnawed rat-like at her heart. How she had tried to forget it, to stifle it, to kill it! For weeks at a time she would cozen herself into the belief that she had succeeded. Surely the vain, frivolous, and soul-drugging life she was living had crushed it at last.

And then, on turning a corner, or in some crowded Broadway restaurant, while laughing dutifully at one of Willy's stories, which she already knew by heart, she would glance across the room to meet the hostile, condemning stare, which withheld recognition without disclaiming it, of some woman whom she had known well in the old days at Great Falls.

It was all very well to tell herself that she did not care what such people thought of her, but she did, she did. She could fairly hear them retailing the story of their encounter on their return to the village.

"Of course I could not be mistaken. It was Hilda Newton, all right. And I could tell that she knew me just as well as I knew her. Of

course I didn't speak to her. I don't think one ought to. My dear, her dress alone must have cost, well dear knows what. And she had a beautiful opera-cloak. Of course it was all in the worst possible taste, she was so overdressed for such a place. It simply *stamped* her. And the people she was with!"

And then there were others, who looked terribly embarrassed, and bowed hastily, and hurried on their way. But, worst of all, in one sense, were some of the men—many of them quite the age her father would have been had he lived—who actually dared to leer and wink at her behind the back of retreating virtue, as exemplified by the women of their families.

To be sure, this time there had been nothing of the usual unpleasantness. It was doubtful if the girl would have recognized Hilda even if she had seen her. Indeed, Hilda, herself, would have passed her by without recognition in ordinary circumstances, remembering her as she did only as a pretty child, who was still wearing her hair down her back in two long braids.

It chanced that Willy had been seized with the whim to dine in a little old-fashioned hotel where report said there was still a small quantity of vintage champagne to be had by any patron sufficiently discerning to ask for it. He desired to spy out the land with the idea of ultimately making an offer for the lot, should

it come up to his expectations. He was to have a dinner for a few important men in a week or two. It would greatly tickle his vanity to be able to offer them something they could not get everywhere.

Accordingly, he had telephoned Hilda, suggesting that she meet him at his office—the hotel was in the lower part of town, far out of their usual beat—and they would taxi up together. He had carefully admonished her that she was to wear a plain street gown. He would not dress, of course. He had even debated for a moment whether it would not be wiser to dismiss the taxi a block away from the hotel. Evidently he was hoping to make a bargain, and thought it more prudent to go disguised as a man of moderate means. Considering his age and experience, Willy was at times extraordinarily naïf.

Hilda had followed all his instructions with the same amused tolerance with which she would have entered into some game with a child. Willy would probably have been astonished to know that it was when he was doing silly things like this that she found him most nearly likable!

They had left his office in a public taxi and were half-way to their destination, when her companion suddenly recalled that there was a little matter he wanted to attend to on the West

Side, near Twenty-third Street. They had stopped in front of a small office building which bore unmistakable signs of having, in its more palmy days, been dedicated to nobler purposes, traces of ecclesiastical architecture still dominating over the clumsy alterations. Indeed the whole neighborhood had the slightly depressing air of a quarter that had seen better days.

As Hilda sat gazing idly from the window of her cab, her wandering attention was arrested at the sight of a young girl coming slowly along the street. Her whole attitude, as she paused to lean against the railing of the high-stooped house opposite, in one of the windows of which was displayed the sign, "Furnished Rooms," betrayed a weary dejection. She was tall and slight and, although her face, shaded by a broad-brimmed hat, was turned away, Hilda felt sure that she was pretty. She was almost primly neat, but about her whole costume—her dress, her hat, even her gloves and shoes—there was an unmistakably countrified air.

For a long moment she stood motionless. And then, after fumbling a moment in the depths of a shabby little bag which she carried on her arm, she found her handkerchief, and proceeded to wipe her eyes before going up the steps to the door.

Hilda gave a little cry of pity. She was not in the least an emotional person. But the mere

glimpse of this weeping little country girl told a whole story with which she was only too familiar. Had it not once been her own? It was only a few short years since she, too, had come to this relentless city to look for work. The miles she had tramped. The advertisements she had answered, only to find that her lack of experience closed all doors against her. An eager willingness to learn was apparently no asset in the commercial world. Day after day she had dragged herself back to the dreary little skylight room in the dirty, dingy lodging-house which she had called home, having met with nothing but rebuffs. The day came when she was only too thankful to meet with a curt refusal, which carried nothing insulting with it. For she had been too handsome not to attract notice. She knew from her own experience what this girl across the street was going through.

The impulse to go over to the weeping girl and say something, she didn't stop to think what, came over her. Her hand was already on the door of the cab, when Willy's strident voice called to her from the entrance of the office-building. He was talking to a man with a keen and intelligent face, dressed like a working-man.

"Hope you're not starved, kid. I'll be there in a second, and we'll have a bang-up dinner."

Hilda sank back in her seat. The girl opposite, half-way up the steps of the house, turned a startled face in the direction of the voice. Her childish lips were parted. There was a frightened look in her blue eyes. But as her glance fell on the waiting cab, she understood that the fat man in the doorway was not calling to her. A wave of color flooded her face. She gave a little, humorous laugh, and hurrying up the steps, unlocked the door and entered the house.

"Why, it's Mary Horton!" gasped Hilda.

Again her hand was on the door, but Willy was already climbing into the cab.

"What's that?"

"I was just saying what a time you have been. What on earth were you doing so long in that shabby old building? And who was that man you were talking to so long?"

"I was longer than I meant to be," admitted Willy, looking at his watch. 'Oh, he's one of those inventor fellows, and a pretty bright one, too. Only he's like all the rest of them. They all think that their ideas are worth millions. I'll let him cool off a few months. By that time he'll be ready to talk business on reasonable terms. I ain't promoting new inventions for my health, you know," he added, with a wise chuckle.

"It's a funny part of town," said Hilda

lightly. "I don't think I've ever been through this street before. What number was that office building, Willy?"

"329. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just wondering. It looked as if it had been a church once."

329, 329. She must try and remember that number.

"Churches don't pay in this berg as much as office buildings," retorted Willy, dismissing religion once for all, with a wave of his hand.

Once arrived at the door of the hotel with the famed cellar, Willy grumbled loudly over the cab fare with the idea of impressing the doorman with the spectacle of his poverty.

The dinner was not an unqualified success. Whether Willy had been rendered unusually captious by the obstinacy of the inventor, or whether it was merely that he missed the lights and noises of his favorite restaurants, he was frankly bored. And Willy, bored, was not an agreeable companion. It was in vain that Hilda talked lightly and brightly on the sort of topics that usually amused him. While grudgingly admitting that the champagne came up to his expectations, he condemned the dinner as unfit to eat, and snarled at the patient waiter throughout the meal. Hilda was only too thankful that the dining-room was nearly empty. She welcomed the dispute over the bill with positive

relief. At least this part of the ordeal was nearly over.

The ride home had been accomplished in almost complete silence. For a wonder Willy had not proposed dropping into one of the music halls.

"What are Polly and Joe up to to-night?" he asked.

"They are dining somewhere with some of Joe's Western customers. I think they are going to the theater later."

"Of course they'd take to-night for it," grumbled Willy. "And I felt just like a game. Why didn't you tell me? We'd have gone to a show ourselves."

He was still scowling heavily when the cab drew up at the door of the apartment. With characteristic politeness, Willy permitted Hilda to climb over him and alight by herself, bidding her good-night with a sullen nod.

She was too thankful to have an evening by herself to feel more than a passing resentment. Once upstairs, she got herself into a peignoir, and threw herself on the couch to wait for Polly's return.

What could have brought Mary Horton to the city? She couldn't be down for a few days' visit. In the first place, she would not have been likely to have come alone, and then the Hortons were too poor to be able to travel for

pleasure. But they owned the little place where they had always lived ever since Hilda could remember. Surely, Mary Horton did not have to come to New York to look for work. To be sure, her mother might have died. She had always been a frail, delicate little creature. Even then, the place would have been hers. She had not looked the type of girl to whom the empty glamour of city life would in itself be overwhelmingly appealing. Then *he* would have been there to advise her. *He,* who had always been so fond of the mother, would have used all his influence to prevent the daughter from seeking to mend her fortunes in the city. *He* knew what a friendless girl—particularly if she happened to be pretty—had to contend with in cities.

Hilda got up from the couch and began to pace the floor. Perhaps he had even used her as a warning or an illustration. But, no. That was an ungenerous thought. Whatever he might think of her himself, she was sure he would never do *that,* if only for the sake of days that were forever gone.

She paused in her feverish walk. She had suddenly come to a resolution. The idea had been in the back of her mind all through this dreary evening. She would go to the house where she had seen the girl that afternoon—it must be 328 or 330, since it was nearly opposite the office building which Willy had told her

was 329—and ask for her. If she needed any help that Hilda could give, it should be most warmly offered. Supposing that the girl declined to be helped by her? It was quite possible. Who knew what stories she might have heard? And the young are always hard in their judgments. Even so, she would risk it. And then perhaps some day—years later—*he* might hear that she had at least offered a helping hand. And perhaps he would think of her more kindly in the future.

Full of her plan, which somehow made her heart feel lighter than it had done for many a day, Hilda went to bed. She didn't want to see even Polly before the morrow.

But she was still awake when she heard her friend come in. And when, hours later, she fell into a troubled sleep, it was only to dream of an old orchard fragrant with apple blossoms that she had known long ago. And *he* was there with her.

"Yes," he was saying, "it seems a long time to look forward to. And it will mean a hard struggle, for, of course, I'll have to work my way through and study like smoke at the same time. And I'll work in my uncle's saw-mill all next summer, so as to have a little laid by, come fall. So I won't be back here for some time. But I'll—I'll find you here when I get back, won't I, Hilda?"

"I guess so, Ned."

And then the dream would change to the day when Willy had first come to the glove counter where she stood through endless days for a wage that just sufficed to keep soul in body. And then, she would be back in the sun-saturated orchard once more. And then, the stuffy shop. And then, the orchard. No wonder that she had circles around her eyes at breakfast.

Polly, having read the Stock Market reports until she could have very nearly recited them, broke in on Hilda's thoughts.

"My little hoodoo's on the job bright and early this morning. It's no bracelet yet awhile for yours truly. A baby could see that. And the way I worked last night to keep those breezy Westerners awake. You know how full of repartee our own little Joseph is. Oh, he's the original reparteeist, little Joseph is, I don't think. He thinks if he pays the dinner check and the theater tickets without taking ether, he's been pleasant enough. The rest is up to little me. And when I suggested, on the way home, that if he got anything out of his Western friends there was a fat commission coming to me, after the way I'd worked to keep them interested, you ought to have heard him yell! He woke the fat policeman on the corner. And that's no joke. At least his eyes were open. I looked at him closely as I was coming in."

"Polly," said Hilda, getting up abruptly, "would you mind awfully if I brought a girl here to stay for a few days, maybe a few weeks? She could sleep in that little room next mine. I don't think she'd bother anybody. She'd be out most of the day, and we are almost always out in the evenings."

"Sure, bring her along. I wouldn't mind. But what do you think the boys would say?"

"Oh, I can't see how it would matter to them. Anyway, I'll talk Willy over, and you can manage Joe. They won't need to see her except occasionally. No doubt the poor kid is tired enough when night comes to turn in early. Besides, I'd rather she didn't see too much of them."

"Too much of them is a good deal," admitted Polly. "But don't you mean that you would prefer that they didn't see too much of *her?*"

"Perhaps I do."

"Who is she?"

"She's a girl from home. I saw her yesterday. Mind you, there's a good chance that she wouldn't care to come. But I'm going to try and see her this afternoon. She's living at a third-rate lodging house. It may be that she's here looking for something to do. If she's straight, and I'm sure she is, I would like to help her all I could. That is, if you're sure you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind. If she's here looking for work, she's up against it. And if I can help out with some of the coin of the realm, why, call on me. Only mind that you don't do it when Joe is about. If he knew I had any money, he'd sue me for damages!"

Hilda went over and kissed her.

"Polly, you're a dear! I knew you'd understand."

And so the question of Mary's welcome was settled as far as Polly was concerned. There remained Joe and Willy. But as long as the proposed guest cost them nothing, and did not interfere with any of their plans, they were neither of them likely to make any strenuous objections.

CHAPTER II

Wishing to arrive at the house before Mary, in order that she might, by a few discreet questions, find out if her guesses as to her situation were correct, Hilda timed her visit a little earlier than the hour at which she had seen the girl the day before. It was only a little after six o'clock when, in answer to her ring, an elderly woman whose face was not unkindly, and who spoke with a faint foreign accent, opened the door.

"Good-afternoon. You have a Miss Horton staying with you, have you not? Is she at home?"

"I haven't seen her come in yet," said the woman. "She usually comes in about this time, or a little later. She gets her supper before she comes home."

She stood in the doorway as if waiting for Hilda's next question.

"Might I come in and wait for her?"

"If you like. You'll have to sit in the hall. I have no parlor."

"Very well."

She stepped aside, and Hilda entered the bare and not overly clean hall. Dusting one of the

two chairs with which it was furnished with an apron which hung over the newel-post, she motioned to Hilda to avail herself of it.

"It might be that she is in her room. Sometimes she comes in while I am upstairs doing some of the rooms. What name shall I say?"

"Mrs. Merrill, please. I'm sorry to trouble you."

The landlady muttered something about not minding the trouble, and went her creaking way up a succession of staircases. After what seemed to Hilda an extraordinarily long time during which some people seemed to be hallooing to each other at the top of the house, she suddenly awoke to the consciousness that it might be *her* name that was being called. She crossed the hall and looked up the well of the staircase.

At the very top of the house the landlady's head appeared over the banister. She was about to make a trumpet of her hands with the evident intention of trying once again.

"She says she don't know any Mrs. Merrill. You've made a mistake," came the voice from on high.

Hilda stifled a wild desire to laugh. "Tell her she knew me when she was a little girl at Great Falls. Ask her, please, to come down, and she'll see it's a girl she used to know," she called.

The woman's head disappeared, and, after a moment, another took its place, peering down anxiously into the gray twilight of the darkened hallway.

"All right; I'll be down," called a fresh, young voice in which Hilda's sharp ear seemed to detect the trace of recent tears. Immediately, the light step of the young girl was heard descending the staircase. Hilda returned to her chair and stood with her hand on the back, her back turned to the old-fashioned fanlight over the door, through whose cobwebby panes the last of the fading daylight came faintly.

She felt almost frightened. For the moment, she regretted the generous impulse that had prompted her to come. She was glad that the woman of the house remained upstairs. Supposing that Mary had heard all sorts of stories about her and would resent her coming? She had not realized until now how much she had builded on the meeting. Supposing that her motives should be misunderstood? No, it couldn't be, that would be too horrible! No one could think *that* even of her. Still, it took all of her self-control to prevent herself opening the door and rushing out of the house before those light feet should bring the girl into view. She closed her eyes and grasped the back of the chair tightly with both hands.

When she opened them, the girl was standing

at the foot of the staircase looking at her wonderingly.

"Mrs. Merrill?" she said in a frightened voice.

"Yes, Mary. Don't you remember me? I am Hilda Newton. You can't have forgotten Hilda Newton, although it is such a long time since I left home." To her own ear, Hilda's voice seemed nervously shrill.

There was a moment's pause.

"Of course I remember you," said the girl slowly. Her forehead was puckered with thought, as if she were vaguely trying to recall something. Even in the dim light Hilda could see that her face suddenly flushed. She drew in her breath sharply.

"If I have come at an inconvenient time——" she began coldly.

"Oh, no, please," said the girl, coming forward for the first time with outstretched hand. "Please forgive me. It is only that I am so puzzled. How *did* you know that I was in town at all, and how did you know that I was here? Did——"

"I don't wonder at your surprise," Hilda smiled brightly. Measured by her relief, her dread of a moment before had been tremendous. "It was quite by accident. But I do so want to have a talk with you. I see you have your hat on. Don't you want to go somewhere with me

and have some tea? It's rather late, I know, but I had so little lunch that I'm nearly famished."

Again the girl flushed painfully. For a moment she looked as if she were about to cry. "She's hungry," said Hilda to herself. "I'm so thankful I came."

"Thank you, I'll be glad to," said Mary, after a moment.

An empty taxi was just turning the corner. Hilda hailed it, and, having thought a moment, ordered the man to drive her to a little tea-shop near Madison Square. There would be few people there at this hour and she would have the girl quite to herself. She must trust to chance to find a good opening for proposing her plan.

As Mary sank back luxuriantly on the cushions, the worn look gave way to one of almost childish pleasure. "Do you know, Mrs.—Mrs. Merrill, this is the first time I've ever ridden in one of these cabs in my whole life?"

"Is it? It's nice to think that you are taking your first ride with me. But you must call me Hilda, won't you? After all, I'm not so very much older than you, although, when I last saw you, you were still in short dresses."

"I'm afraid you must remember what an awful tomboy I always was. I just hated to

grow up, and stop playing boy's games *with* boys. But even mother insisted at last, and you know mothers are the last people to realize that their children are grown up."

"Tell me about your mother," said Hilda gently. "I remember her so well."

"Oh, mother's been better the last year or so than she's been for years. It's all owing to Doctor Simpson, I'm sure. He's like a son to her, and comes to see her nearly every day. If it hadn't been for him I know mother would never have let me come to the city at all. But he persuaded her to let me try it. You remember Doctor Simpson, of course, Mrs.—I mean Hilda."

"Yes," said Hilda, stooping over to arrange the laprobe. "I remember him very well. Only he wasn't Doctor Simpson when I knew him. The last time I saw him was just before he started away for college."

"Oh, that was ever so long ago, wasn't it? I never really knew him until he came back home and began his practice. He must have worked awfully hard. His hair is quite gray. Do you know," she finished with a laugh, "I always thought that he was quite an old man, maybe fifty, until mother told me that he wasn't more than thirty-five. Mother's a terrible person! I do believe she knows how old everyone is up at Great Falls. But everyone says he's

the best doctor for miles round. He's busy all the time," she added loyally.

"Let me see, he was married a few years ago, wasn't he?" asked Hilda carelessly.

"Gracious, no! He's an old bachelor. Mother says she don't think he'll ever marry."

A little spasm of pain contracted Hilda's mouth. But she managed to say in the same studiedly careless tone that she thought she had heard someone say that the doctor was married. Arrived at the tea-room, Hilda carefully ordered as elaborate tea as the place could furnish, and, excusing herself to her guest, went into the little telephone booth to let Polly know that she would probably be late for dinner, and that they had best go without her.

Polly's report of conditions at home was humorous, if not altogether cheerful.

"Oh, yes, we're all here having the usual gay little time we always have when we have to wait for our dinner. Willy is asleep on the sofa. You know how pleasant he always is when he wakes up. I wouldn't take the job of calling him in the morning for a thousand dollars a call! Joe is figuring up his expense account for the week to see if we can afford to eat at all. No, you'd better not try to meet us anywhere. The last news from the front before our darling fell asleep was that we

would have a nice, quiet evening at home, playing poker. Don't fail to be home for that. We might not be able to find a fifth hand. Four's bad enough, Heaven knows. And three——"

Hilda promised not to be late, and hurried back to find that the tea was just being served. She had not felt in the least hungry, and had intended to make the best pretense she could at eating, so that Mary should have a hearty repast. She was convinced that the child had not had a real meal for some time.

But she found that the simple, wholesome things tasted better than anything she had had for ages. Willy, who always ordered their dinners, had a taste for highly spiced food, and, having made a profound study of the specialties of every well-known restaurant in New York, always led them to the dish, rather than the restaurant, which happened to appeal to his fancy of the moment. Hilda smiled to herself at the thought of what he would have said had he, by any evil chance, been present. If there was one topic on which Willy could have been said to rise to the heights of positive eloquence, it was the subject of "home cooking."

It was pretty to see Mary's enjoyment of everything. She ate heartily with the healthy appetite of the young, but it was plain that she found her chief pleasure in Hilda's society. Hilda had intended waiting until the first

pangs of hunger were appeased before touching on the subject of her coming to New York and her experiences since her arrival. But Mary was evidently quite as hungry for companionship as for more substantial food. She was quite as eager to tell her story as Hilda was to hear it. The momentary sensation of well-being restored all of her natural vivacity. Her eyes, which had been shadowed with trouble, sparkled with pleasure. Her childish mouth lost its little pathetic droop. Hilda decided that she was a charming, simple-hearted creature, with a healthy capacity for enjoyment, which might have been dangerous, if she were not so thoroughly unspoiled.

It was now almost three weeks since she had left home, and she admitted frankly that her slender stock of money was nearly exhausted. In reply to Hilda's question as to why she had come to the city, she confessed that it was partly because she was bored to death with the monotony of country life. But the final and impelling motive had been her desire to earn money to eke out her mother's slender income, which, somehow, year by year, in spite of the most careful economies, seemed to grow less and less. What was there for her to do at Great Falls? Nothing. She couldn't even help much at home. For her mother insisted on doing much of the work herself, as

she had always done, and besides, there was Sadie Gibson, who had lived with them for several years, to do the really heavy work.

"You remember Sadie, don't you?" she asked with a mischievous smile.

"I should think I did!" laughed Hilda. "Tell me, is Sadie still the man-hater she used to be? It's strange, for Sadie was not at all bad-looking. But her tongue would frighten any man that ever lived. I don't think I ever heard her say a good word for a man in my life."

"No, Sadie hasn't changed—unless in the case of the doctor. She seems to make an exception of him. But mother wouldn't let her abuse Doctor Simpson."

"And do you mean to say that your mother was willing that you should come way off here without knowing a soul," began Hilda, anxious to change the subject from Doctor Simpson. "Surely there must be——" She stopped abruptly. She had been on the point of saying that there must be some people in Great Falls who had acquaintances in the city. But she suddenly remembered that Mary might recall that no one had suggested her looking *her* up.

"Oh, no," Mary went on without appearing to notice that Hilda had checked herself. "I had letters to half a dozen people, but much good they've done me," she added with a bit-

ter little laugh. "Horace Worth, the cashier of the bank, gave them to me. They were to friends of his. Perhaps you remember Horace, too."

"Remember that hypocrite? I should think I did!"

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear you call him that! I think I almost hate Horace Worth! And mother won't hear a word against him. She says he's peculiar, but that he has a good heart. I don't believe he has, do you?"

"Not what I would call a good heart."

"Well, I don't mind telling you that Horace Worth is at bottom my real reason for leaving home. He's been making love to me." Her face flushed at the recollection.

Hilda gave a hard little laugh. "I suppose he thinks the time has come to settle down —at last."

"Well, I don't think he'll ever settle down with me," said Mary with a determined shake of her head.

At this moment the waitress came toward the table with the check, and Hilda saw that it was time for the place to close.

"I hope everything was quite all right, madam," she said politely as Hilda gave her the money.

"Everything was very nice, thank you. Wasn't it, Mary?"

"I haven't enjoyed anything so much since I left home," said Mary fervently. "And you know my mother is a famous cook."

"Yes, I remember she was. Now I'm going to walk part way back with you, because I have something to say to you. But first, let me give you my card with my address. I want you to come up to my apartment to-morrow afternoon, if that will suit you. I want to hear all about your plans. But I have to hurry back home now, as I have some friends coming in this evening, and I will just have time to dress. You will come, won't you? And by the way, couldn't you come for lunch?"

"There's no reason I couldn't," said Mary frankly. "Unfortunately, I haven't a thing to do. I mean," she said with a little embarrassed laugh, "that I haven't had any luck yet in finding a job."

"That's just what I want to talk to you about. You know I know a lot about such things, and so does my friend Polly, who lives with me."

"That's awfully good of you, Hilda. And I didn't even have a letter to you. I don't know why you take so much trouble. I will write to mother to-night and tell her how good you've been. And I'll tell her what I haven't told her before—how perfectly horrid all those

people to whom Horace gave me letters have been!"

"No, no! Don't write yet. Wait until after I see you to-morrow. I have a particular reason for asking it. Will you promise?"

"Of course, if you wish it. And now, please don't bother to come any further with me. I know my way perfectly well from here, and I know you want to get home."

"You're quite sure? Then I will leave you. But, Mary, there's one thing more. Remember, I too came to New York to look for work. I know all about it. I want you to take this, as a loan, for the moment. To-morrow we'll talk things over and make some plans. Oh, there's my car!" And thrusting a bill in Mary's hand, she signaled an approaching car.

Before Mary could even stammer a word of thanks, the doors closed and the car started on again, leaving her standing with tear-brimmed eyes gazing at the tightly folded bill in her hand. How thoughtful of her to remember that car fares probably meant so much to her just then. As a matter of fact, Mary's heart had sunk within her when she read the address which seemed so far uptown, for she must walk one way, at least. As she was putting the bill in her purse, she noticed that it had a yellow back. She had never seen one before. How pretty it was. Heavens, it was a

twenty-dollar bill! Hilda had made a dreadful mistake. She must go up to her house at once and give it back.

But when she remembered that Hilda had seemed to have several bills in her handbag, and that she had said that she was expecting some friends in that evening, she decided that it would do no harm to wait until the next morning. It didn't seem as if she could need it that night. The chances were that she wouldn't even know of her loss before Mary herself told her about it. And she really was very tired. Besides, she wanted to freshen up her best shirtwaist before going up to lunch. She slept that night with the precious bill folded into a tiny wad shut up in an old silver locket which she always wore, containing two old photographs of her father and mother.

At frequent intervals during the evening Hilda's mind wandered back to Mary. Indeed, but for the fortunate chance that she happened to sit next Polly at the card table, which enabled her sprightly friend to administer warning kicks from time to time when she was on the point of keeping the others waiting, she would have brought Willy's wrath down on her devoted head. But Willy was particularly urbane on this occasion. The much-desired fifth hand turned out to be a new acquaintance whom Willy and Joe had met in a business way.

Hilda found herself particularly interested in him, not only because Willy treated him with marked affability, but because he had an unusual personality which appealed to her, while it faintly irritated her at the same time.

All women are at heart aristocrats, in so far as cherishing a secret preference for the society of men who possess at least the outward and superficial signs of good breeding, in all but particular cases. Both she and Polly recognized that Mr. Robert Merrick was in a class apart from Willy and Joe, whose manners might be said to have been formed more on the Broadway than on the Fifth Avenue standard.

Nevertheless, she was conscious of a certain hardness underneath his charming and polished manner, which she felt might, on closer acquaintance, be easily more repellent than Joe's frank meanness or Willy's unconscious vulgarity. One thing was certain: whether it was because he was a new acquaintance or whether, as she suspected, his hosts had some deep motive for appearing at their best, the evening was the pleasantest she had known for some time. She had come to dread this new fancy of Willy's for having a "quiet evening at home, with just a little game."

Not only did cards bore her, but the continual bickerings, especially between Joe and

Polly, wearied her terribly. Polly's luck, combined with her undoubted skill, always brought her in a large winner. And as Joe played nearly as badly as Hilda herself, he usually bore the heaviest part of the evening's losses. To put it mildly, Joe was not a graceful loser. But to-night even Joe spoke of his bad luck with a certain jocularity. At the end of the evening Hilda found herself nearly three hundred dollars to the good. Merrick, who was also slightly ahead, proposed that they all go out to supper, but to Hilda's infinite relief it was postponed to another time.

"That Mr. Merrick is certainly the original Miracle Man," called Polly from her room, as the two girls were getting ready for bed. "I hope he'll come often. Why, Joe handed you a roll of bills without making any more fuss than if they were subway tickets. I'd be worried about Joe if it weren't that he had told me that there was a deal on with Merrick. I hope he don't have to borrow the fare back to Canada."

"He's a Canadian, is he?"

"I don't know about that. But he's been up there mining for ever so long, he told me. Well, did you see your girl?"

"Yes."

"Is she coming up?"

"I didn't have a chance to talk about it.

But she's coming up to lunch to-morrow, or to-day, rather. You'll be in, won't you?"

"If you want me to."

"Of course I want you to. I hope you'll like her. She's really nice."

"Did you speak to Willy about her?"

"Just a word or two. He won't care how long she stays, just as long as she doesn't get in his road."

"Well, good-night!" called Polly. "I simply can't keep my eyes open another minute. I'm glad you won to-night. I don't want to win all the time."

CHAPTER III

Over a month had gone by since Mary had first come up to lunch. Hilda had awakened that morning in a perfect panic of cowardice over the whole thing. While she was dressing, she had decided that, after all, she could not ask her to come there, even for a time. How could she answer all the child's questions? How account for the non-appearance of the fictitious Mr. Merrill? And for the constant presence of Joe and Willy? And yet her heart had gone out strongly to the girl. She was sure that she would be safer with her than living the way she was. By her own confession, Mary's money was getting low. She could at least be sure that she had food and shelter.

And the thought of having that fresh, young presence near her, of hearing her speak constantly of the people and places which she herself could never see again, of hearing occasional news of *him*. How could she give it up? She tossed the question back and forth in her mind all the time she was dressing without arriving at any conclusion. In the end, she weakly decided to leave the whole thing to chance. She would wait to see what impression

Mary and Polly made on each other. After they had met she would frankly ask Polly's advice. She had the greatest confidence in Polly's judgment.

As it turned out, it was Polly who really decided the matter without waiting to be consulted. Perhaps she had read the indecision in her friend's face. Whether it was out of consideration for Hilda or whether it was because she, too, had taken a fancy to Mary on first sight, she certainly spared no effort to make herself charming and agreeable. She was at her most amusing best all through lunch. Hilda could see that Mary was completely fascinated by her continual flow of high spirits, albeit frequently puzzled by Polly's vocabulary, which embraced all the latest New York slang, with which her auditor, naturally, was unfamiliar.

Acting as if it had already been given, Polly indorsed Hilda's invitation to Mary to join forces with them until she should have more settled plans. In no time she discovered that Mary was really very clever with her needle, and had followed up this discovery by offering to keep her busy for an indefinite time on a lot of things which she was sure "anyone who knew one end of a needle from another could easily do," and which, it appeared, she had been in dire need of for ever so long. Hilda

had fresh reason to bless Polly's ready invention, and before the lunch was concluded it had all been arranged. Mary was to return to the lodging house, pay her arrears of rent, and return with her modest trunk the following day. That would give the conspirators time to prepare Willy and Joe for her coming, and generally explain the situation. Mary's mind was set at rest on the subject of the twenty-dollar bill. There had been no mistake. Only now, in place of looking on it as a loan, she could simply consider it a little payment in advance. And Hilda, promising to explain more fully later, had suggested that Mary make no mention of her in writing home. She could simply say that she had obtained work sewing at the house of a Mrs. Merrill.

Mary, having stayed until late in the afternoon, left with a lighter heart than she had known for many a day. Being so gorgeously wealthy, she was able not only to pay her landlady the small sum she owed her, but to send—with what a feeling of pride!—five dollars home to her mother, which she knew would dispel whatever vague feeling of anxiety she might have had as to her welfare.

Hilda's embargo on telling her mother frankly to whom she owed the good fortune that had come to her vaguely disturbed and annoyed her. She could not help feeling that

in holding back the name of her benefactress she was in a measure deceiving her. And she had never had a secret from her mother in her life. But she salved her conscience with the thought that Hilda had promised to explain it all later. She dismissed the subject from her mind. She had so many pleasanter things to think of. Not the least of these was how pleased her dear doctor would be when her mother proudly showed him the money she had sent, for, of course, she would show it to him. And if the thought of how the sight of that same money, a proof of the fact that she was on the way to success, would annoy Horace Worth, gave her an almost equal amount of pleasure, does it not throw quite as much light on the character of Horace as it does on that of Mary?

As often happens in this life, Hilda found that the mere fact of having come to a definite decision had the same effect upon all the opposing obstacles she had imagined that the rising sun has upon the early mists of the morning. Either that or her nervous fancy had made her exaggerate the importance of Mary's coming, because it meant so much to her personally.

Neither Willy nor Joe offered the faintest objection to it. As a matter of fact, they were both of them in an unusually genial mood. Joe

even paid the taxi fare without having to be reminded that it was his turn. An act which led Polly to express fears that he was not long for this world.

It was not until the end of an unusually gay dinner that Willy announced their departure on the following day for a little trip to Montreal and the wilds of Canada, which might keep them away for a week or two. It appeared that they and their friend, Bob Merrick, were going on a little pleasure trip which had fishing for its end and object.

The girls received the news with frank incredulity. The spectacle of fat Willy, who never walked a block and who considered any form of exercise as a form of insanity, braving the hardships of the wilderness, afforded them both—particularly Polly—much amusement. And Joe as a fisherman presented an equally impossible figure to the imagination. Polly even offered to lay a modest wager that he didn't know one end of a rod from the other. But that prudent young man was not to be entrapped.

As a crowning dissipation they went to one of the picture shows, which was just then being talked about. But as Willy slept through most of it, and Joe occupied himself with making exhaustive calculations in a note-book, the girls voted to leave before it was over.

As the two men were to leave on the following morning, they made their adieus at the door of the apartment house, promising to send quantities of picture postcards to add to Polly's collection, and to keep them generally informed as to their movements.

As the elevator shot up to their floor, Polly impulsively threw her arms about her friend.

"Oh, Hilda! Did you ever hear anything so heavenly? Why, I feel like a kid that's just been told that the school was going to be closed on account of measles."

"Hush!" said Hilda warningly, with a gesture toward the broad back of the colored elevator boy.

"Oh, I don't care!" exclaimed Polly. But she succeeded in keeping her raptures to herself until they were once more safely behind closed doors. Once away from prying eyes and ears, she tangoed the length of the drawing-room. "Hilda, you wooden image! Do you realize what it means to be able to go out when you please and come in when you please for two whole blessed weeks? I shall only eat in little scrubby restaurants and places like Childs'. I'm going to wear all my oldest clothes and not dress up once. Broadway and Fifth Avenue might just as well shut up, if they are depending on me to go to their tiresome old places! Oh, how sick I am of them

all! And I'm going to knit in the evenings and go to bed early."

"It will be lovely," sighed Hilda. "You and Mary and I can go to all sorts of nice, cheap little places. And we can cook dinners here at home, and be nice and comfy."

"Me for corn beef and cabbage and the simple life. I'm sick to death of high-life food," agreed Polly. And in spite of Hilda's protests, she insisted on singing to herself long after they had both gone to bed.

The vacation had extended itself by nearly a week before the two men eventually returned. It would have been hard to say which one of the three enjoyed it the most. The programme that Polly had outlined had been scrupulously adhered to with but trifling alterations. The Great White Way saw them no more, at least during the evenings. Hilda declared that Polly spent her days searching out new and delightful places to dine, for, to Mary's astonishment, they rarely visited the same place twice. It was Polly, also, who acted as bursar. And a wonderful manager she proved herself. At the end of the first week the three together had not spent as much as they were accustomed to spend for one dinner ordinarily.

Then, occasionally, they had dinner at home, and Hilda found that she had not altogether forgotten how to cook. If there was anything

needed to add to Polly's pleasure, that need was supplied by the thought of how Joe would have felt if he could have known how much she was saving.

The two men wrote occasionally—they neither one could be said to shine as correspondents — but characteristically. Willy's epistles were mostly reiterations of what he had always declared: that a man couldn't get a decent bite to eat in all America outside of New York. Joe confined himself to lamenting that traveling cost so much. But of the fishing there was never a word. At last came the delayed telegram: "Home Thursday. With you for dinner. Willy."

"They don't charge for signatures, do they? I should have thought Joe would have signed it too!" was Polly's only comment.

With the return of the two men, of course the old life was resumed. Mary was as much affected by the change as either of the others. At first she had gone out each morning to look for work, returning in time for luncheon, and spending the afternoon sewing and chatting with the two older girls. There was not a week that she was not able to inclose in her cheerful, happy letters a small sum of money. She was as eager as ever to find a position. How proud she would be when she was earning something outside and could contribute to the

general expenses of the household. She didn't suppose it would be much for a long, long time. But it would be something, enough, at least, to show her appreciation for all that her friends had done for her.

For Mary was very simple-hearted. She knew that the large, handsomely furnished apartment must cost a pretty penny. But she accounted for it on the theory that Hilda's husband must be well off. As his name was never mentioned, she concluded that her friend had made an unhappy marriage. She even had a mental picture of the absent Mr. Merrill. He was elderly and fat, and, of course, utterly lacking in all the finer sensibilities, else he could not have failed to appreciate her beautiful Hilda. As for Polly, she was evidently one of those rich bachelor girls she had read about in the papers.

It was Polly who took upon herself to break the news of the coming change in the routine of their lives. Polly had a positive talent for explanations. But in this case, as she confessed afterwards to Hilda, she had, so to speak, only touched the high spots in her narrative. Mary had a confused impression that their ordinary routine was to be temporarily interrupted by the return of two old friends, who were fond of dining at the most expensive restaurants and seeing all the new things at

the theaters. Naturally they would expect the two girls to give up a lot of time to them. They always had done so. Evenings that they did not go out, they would want to play cards. They were perfect fiends over cards. It was all more or less of a bore, of course. But they were such old friends. After a while they would go away again, and peace and quiet would resume their sway.

"But," said Hilda as she listened to Polly's sketchy account of her talk with Mary, frowning at the reflection of her handsome face in the mirror, "I'm only afraid that she'll think we're horribly mean not to take her with us, particularly if they bring that Merrick man along, as they probably will. It'll look so funny, an odd man."

"You don't mean to say you *want* her to go with us?"

"Heaven forbid!"

"Then don't worry," said Polly wisely. "I'm going to wear the most gorgeous dress I own Thursday. That will be explanation enough for any woman."

"There's another thing," objected Hilda. "She thinks they are only here for a sort of visit. You know yourself it's the rarest thing in the world for them to go away without us."

"Heavens, how unreasonable you are!" exclaimed Polly impatiently. "You can't expect

me to make an explanation that will cover a lifetime all at once. Besides, a thousand things may happen in a month. Mary might go back home or get a job. Don't let's worry about the future till we have to."

Six o'clock on Thursday saw the returned travelers, accompanied by Merrick. Mary found in Willy Morgan a perfect replica of the picture she had formed of the unattractive Mr. Merrill. She was not much more favorably impressed with Joe Garfield. Robert Merrick she decided was the nicest of the three. All of them, however, treated her with studied politeness. But her impressions of the three men were soon forgotten in more significant things.

Willy had hardly taken off his hat when he went over to a small cabinet which Mary had always innocently supposed held extra phonograph records. With the air of one perfectly at home he ordered Joe to ring the bell. The girls had sent out word that they would be dressed in a few minutes. When the maid appeared, her face wreathed with smiles of respectful recognition, Willy had slipped a bill in her hand and ordered glasses and cracked ice.

From the cabinet he took a number of cut-glass bottles, which Mary had never seen before and which she saw from little silver labels

which hung round their necks by chains contained various brands of whisky.

The maid, having reappeared with the desired articles with a celerity which argued that she was not unprepared for the request, he had proceeded to pour out drinks for them all, not forgetting to offer the first to Mary, who, of course, declined it. To her amazement, he himself had already consumed three before Hilda and Polly finally made their appearance.

Mary had never dreamed of anything half so beautiful as the dresses which her two friends wore that evening. Polly was radiantly pretty, and apparently in her most michievous mood. She carried an opera cloak over one bare arm, and sitting on the arm of the little tête-à-tête, proceeded to pull on a pair of long gloves. Mary had never in her life seen anyone décolleté before. For a moment she felt like crying. She looked over at Hilda, who, grave and handsome, was standing talking to Willy. She was wearing her cloak thrown over her bare shoulders, but Mary could see that she was even more daringly décolleté than Polly.

No one paid her the least attention, for which she was devoutly thankful. It gave her time to pull herself together. If Hilda wore such things it must be right, she decided loyally. After all, she was only a country girl. People in cities looked at things differently. But all

the same, she knew now that all the little intimate, happy days were over. After this evening nothing would ever be the same.

Everyone but Hilda seemed in high spirits. Polly was bantering Joe and Willy on the improvement which a life in the open had made in their appearance, all of which they took good-naturedly until she made an allusion to fishing, when a portentious scowl from Willy showed her that she was on the wrong track.

Mary could not follow her friend's badinage very intelligently. Particularly was she puzzled that anyone should think that Willy looked anything but unhealthy. To her he was unpleasantly white and puffy until, fortified by several more drinks, which flushed his fat face until it was fairly purple. Joe, too, was what she would have described as sallow. Merrick was the only one who looked to her to be at all fit.

Hilda was plainly impatient to be gone. After several efforts she succeeded in getting her party started. Both she and Polly kissed Mary warmly, and cautioned her against sitting up for them.

Over her lonely supper Mary felt almost as desolate as she had in the days before Hilda had rescued her from her dreary lodging-house life. With sudden self-reproach she reminded herself of all they had done for her, and sewed

the harder on some work for Hilda until an unusually late hour. But while her fingers were busily occupied, her mind was free to speculate on the delightful evening her friends must be having. Who could fail to be happy, dining at beautiful restaurants, surrounded with music and flowers, with silver and glass, pleasantly conscious that in all that gay, bright throng no one could be more beautifully dressed than oneself! She was sure there wasn't a woman in New York more sparklingly pretty than Polly or more regally handsome than her Hilda. How superb she had looked with that diamond dagger in her hair! And in spite of her resolution to remember how much she had to be thankful for and how she asked for nothing more than to find some employment which would pay her enough to send some money home each week and to make some modest contribution toward the running of the household, Mary cried herself to sleep.

She did not hear them come in, and when she came in to breakfast the next morning, it was only to find a kind note from Hilda explaining that as they had been shockingly late, she and Polly would probably not see her before lunch time. She spent the morning, as usual, looking for work. It seemed as if she had never met with so many rebuffs nor encountered such brutally rude people. But the thought of the

lunch hour, when she would hear all about the beautiful evening in Fairyland, helped her through it.

But, alas! She returned only to find that she was to have her lunch alone. Neither Hilda nor Polly had rung yet. She dragged herself through an afternoon that seemed even harder than the morning. On coming back a little after six, the maid put in her hand a hurried scrawl from Polly, regretting that they had all gone out in an automobile at four o'clock to have dinner somewhere out of town. Once more she was admonished not to sit up late. She could only make a pretense of eating the dainty dinner, which Hilda had thoughtfully ordered for her. Once more she spent the evening sewing, and once more her pillow was wet with tears.

This one day was a fair sample of the ones that followed. She hardly caught more than a fleeting glimpse of the two girls, usually while they were dressing to go out. But, if anything, both Hilda and Polly showed in every way in their power that they felt as affectionately toward her as ever.

Of the three men she saw but little. She had a feeling that Hilda preferred that she should not have very much of their society. She had even overheard Willy more than once suggest that "they bring the kid along." But

Hilda always vetoed any such proposition. Of course, Hilda knew best, and of course, she would look like a scarecrow in her country-made, shabby clothes. But it did seem hard. And she had seen the delighted maid coming out of Hilda's room one morning carrying on her arm a beautiful evening gown, nearly as good as new, which her mistress had just given her. She herself was about Hilda's height. She was sure that she could have worn that dress with but little alteration, such as she could easily have made.

There were a great many things she didn't understand. Was it, after all, quite nice in Hilda to be always dining out with a man—for they always seemed to pair off, Hilda and Willy, and Joe and Polly; Merrick alone seemed to be unattached—who wasn't her husband? No doubt the absent Mr. Merrill was a beast. Polly had once even intimated as much. But he certainly was most generous to Hilda in the matter of money. She had a lovely house, beautiful clothes and jewels—everything, it seemed, that the heart could wish for. Not that she looked happy. Sometimes when she was alone or was not conscious that anyone was looking at her, Mary thought that she had never seen a sadder face.

Perhaps it was because Hilda felt that she was not doing exactly right that she had prac-

tically forbidden Mary to write home anything about her. Mary was sure that her mother would not approve of Hilda's mode of life on general principles. Somebody must have heard about it, however, in Great Falls. She recalled that no one had ever spoken of Hilda Newton in her presence for years. And Hilda was not the sort of person that people would be apt to forget.

Mary puzzled over the whole thing a good deal. But before long there came a day when everything was made perfectly clear. And by a simple little paragraph in a paper, which she had chanced to see while eating a hurried lunch in a little dairy.

CHAPTER IV

It had been one of those stifling days with which summer seems to take pleasure in announcing herself. Hilda and Polly had not risen until late in the afternoon, and had therefore not seen Mary since the day before. Willy had telephoned up early in the afternoon, saying that they would be up early, as everything was dead downtown. That meant an hour of poker before going out to dinner. Hilda groaned at the thought, never having learned to care for the game under the most favorable conditions. Polly was more philosophical.

"Don't you care," she called from the bed in her room. "We may both of us win a little something. At least I have a hunch that I'm going to. And every little bit added to what you've got—you know the rest."

"Polly, I do believe you'll end by being as much of a miser as Joe. Think of having to get dressed an hour earlier in all this heat!"

"I don't care how I end, so that it isn't in the poorhouse. Besides, we can take our time dressing and not be so rushed as usual. I'll have Lucile make me some iced tea to drink while I'm making myself beautiful."

"No, you won't She's gone out. I told her she could go early. Her cousin or somebody's going to be married this evening."

"Well, I see that I'll have to struggle along without it—unless you would like to make me some."

"I *would* not, thank you. I'm half sick with the heat. Do you know, Polly, I'm worried about Willy. There must be something really the matter with him. He's crosser than a bear, and have you noticed how he falls asleep in his chair? Why, the other night he fell asleep in the middle of dinner."

"I should think I *had* noticed it. No one with an eye for beauty could fail to notice Willy asleep. He ought to go to a doctor. I guess he's afraid to."

"Willy is an awful coward when it comes to doctors. He's afraid of hearing the truth. Well, I suppose I've got to get up and dress. How idiotic to get into a dinner gown in the middle of the afternoon!"

For once the men found the two women dressed when they arrived, the card table set out, and the cracked ice and the drinks waiting for them. Even Willy grudgingly admitted that the place looked comfortable and inviting. All three of them—for Merrick was now regularly a member of the party, just why could only be suspected—were in their dinner coats.

Merrick glanced laughingly at his two friends and then at the two girls in their pretty, light evening gowns.

"I know now how an actor must feel who's playing at a matinée," he said.

"Well, I thought," explained Willy, who was always most polite to Merrick, however snappish he might be to the others, "that we'd come up early and have a game before dinner. Anything to forget the heat. My, how I hate summer!"

The game started in a way to justify Polly's hunch. For the first few hands she won everything in sight. This fact, combined with the heat, was too much for Joe's temper. He and Polly quarreled over every pot. Willy and Merrick seemed rather amused. But Hilda, whose own nerves were jangling, found difficulty in keeping her attention on the game. Polly was just slowly raking in her fifth pot, appraising it meanwhile with a cold and calculating eye.

"Who's shy in this pot? Come on! Come on! Who's the bashful gentleman?"

"What are you looking at me for?" demanded Joe indignantly.

"I wouldn't accuse you for anything in this world, Joe. But I certainly don't remember seeing you come up."

"I had just two blue chips left. I'll leave it

to anyone in the party," stormed Joe. "What are you grouching about, anyhow? You've won everything. You've filled three flushes, and we've only been playing about a quarter of an hour!"

"All diamonds, too!" said Polly with suspicious sweetness. "I wonder if that's a sign you're going to give me that bracelet, after all."

"With business like it is now? Drive on!"

"To hear you bleat, anyone would think the Salvation Army ought to open a Wall Street soup kitchen!"

"Your cards, Polly. I'll turn the lights on," said Hilda, rising from the table and going to the switch in the hope of making a diversion.

"You'd better when *she* deals," sneered Joe. "Three diamond flushes! You drew two cards to the last one, didn't you?"

"I had a hunch," said Polly, pausing long enough in her dealing to give him her most impish smile.

"You had a nerve!"

"Don't mind him, Miss Polly. He's sore because you're winning all the money," said Merrick, trying to make peace.

"All the money! He's getting to be more of a tightwad every hour he lives! He called me just now with three aces in his hand. Three aces!"

"I've played with you before."

This time Polly was genuinely angry.

"Do you mean to insinuate——" she began, springing to her feet.

"Oh, come, come!" said Hilda soothingly as she resumed her seat. "Play the game. What do you do, Joe?"

"I pass—when Polly deals," snarled Joe, who was evidently in one of his most unpleasant moods.

"I open it. Two dollars," said Bob Merrick hastily.

They all looked to see what Willy would do. But Willy did nothing. He was fast asleep, his unlighted cigar hanging from the corner of his mouth. As Polly had observed, he was not exactly a lovely sight.

"He's asleep again!" laughed Bob.

"Here, little one! Willy, they're off!" called Polly.

"He's a wonder," sighed Joe.

Willy's lips moved. The cigar dropped from his mouth to the table. Hilda's face flushed crimson. She leaned over and shook him by the arm.

"Willy, wake up!"

"Mount Vernon!" mocked Polly.

"Eh? Oh! Who won the pot?" asked Willy with a foolish smile, blinking his eyes.

"This is another year, Willy dear. We are

They all looked to see what Willy would do. But Willy did nothing.

looking for a little more of your money," cooed Polly.

"Oh," said Willy, picking up his cards. "I open it."

"That's awfully good of you. But our friend from the wilds of Canada has already obliged."

"Two dollars, Mr. Morgan," said Bob pleasantly.

"All right," said Willy cheerfully, counting out a couple of chips. "Who dealt the cards?"

"Polly," said Joe meaningly.

"In spite of that I'll stay." He winked good-naturedly at Polly.

"Not for me," said Hilda, tossing her hand into the discard.

"Two dollars more," said Polly, her eye on Joe.

"Little Bright Eyes on the trail again!"

"I play my cards when I have them!"

"And you have them, all right—when you deal."

"Your hand is dead," said Polly coldly. "How many, Mr. Merrick?"

"Three, please."

She glanced at Willy, who was beginning to nod again. "Willy! Quick! Draw your cards, then sleep in peace."

"I'm not asleep. I'll try one. Hilda, mix me a drink, will you?"

"How many cards do *you* take, Miss Cary?" asked Bob.

"I'll play these."

"Is it polite to laugh?" asked Joe

Polly gave him a withering glance. "Make your bets, please."

"Mine aren't quite good enough," said Merrick after a moment.

"Come on, Willy, come on!"

"You win," said Willy. "What did you have?"

"Flush," said Polly briefly. She began hauling in the pot with one hand, the other on top of the discard.

"I'm going to look at that," said Joe.

"Let my cards alone, you piker!" There was genuine anger in her tone.

"Polly, Polly!" remonstrated Hilda.

"If you don't believe me, call. That's what your chips are for."

Joe saw that he had gone too far. "What's the good of getting sore? You know I was only kidding."

"You can't kid me. Deal the cards. It's your turn. And put up for the Jack. Thank Heaven, there's two dollars of your money we have a chance at!"

"A man's a chump to sit in a poker game with women," said Joe sulkily, dealing the cards. "I remember I told my wife once——"

He stopped awkwardly, leaving his sentence unfinished.

Two bright spots of color burned in Polly's face. Her eyes sparkled angrily. "And you call yourself a gentleman!"

"Now, Polly," said Joe with real anxiety, "you know I didn't——"

"Let me tell you something, Joe Garfield! No man with any real class ever mentions a subject like his wife in the presence of the lady he's keeping company with! His wife! Why doesn't he go back to her?"

"Can't you two stop this infernal scrapping? It makes it mighty unpleasant for everybody," protested Willy, now thoroughly wide awake. He glanced at Hilda out of the corner of his eye. There was an uncomfortable pause. Once more it was Bob Merrick who rushed to the rescue.

"I'll open this one, too. Five dollars this time."

"I'm with you," said Willy, who hadn't even looked at his cards.

"I haven't seen even a pair to-day!" Hilda pushed back her chair and went wearily over to the window. How thankful she was that Mary had not been there. And yet, what difference could it make? She was bound to find out some time. Polly and Joe were always quarreling nowadays. And when Polly was angry she

never minced matters. Why did she care so much? After all, it was only one more person to despise her! She had gone over all that once, long ago—and decided to pay the price. She went over to the tabouret and poured herself a drink, making a wry face as she swallowed it.

In the meantime Polly, of course, had signified her intention of "trailing along" and they were all waiting for Joe, who appeared to be in a brown study.

"Well, Joe? Well? You can't make 'em grow!" admonished Willy, who seemed remarkably wide awake.

"Give him time. He likes to dream he's with us!" mocked Polly.

"I'm coming in," said Joe firmly. "And I —I—I raise it ten dollars."

"Anything less than four aces is dead," remarked Polly to the world at large.

"Ten more? Humph!" Willy looked at his cards this time. "Sort of reckless, aren't you, Joe?"

"You don't know Joe, the boy plunger!" laughed Polly. "I'll bet he hasn't got a thing —but a straight flush!"

"Well, I've just got to hang by him," said Willy, putting in his chips. "How about you, Polly?"

With maddening deliberation Polly studied

her cards, mimicking Joe so capitally that even he had to join in the general laugh. "Well—seeing it's Joe—I'll just boost him ten." She suited the action to the word.

"I—er——" stammered Joe.

"Only ten more, darling. That won't mean any more to you than your right eye!"

"T-t-ten more?"

"Yes, dear. You mustn't choke when you say it."

"I'll stay!"

"Believe *me,* he's got 'em!"

"You can't bluff me, you know," said Joe, swaggering.

"No, dear, of course not. Nobody'd dare try such a thing. But," she pointed an accusing finger at the pot, "*in the excitement,* I'm afraid you've neglected something. Come up with the ten."

"Oh!" He slowly shoved the needed chips into the pot. "Well, come on now! How many cards?"

"One, please," said Merrick.

"Two." This from Willy.

"Two?" In a tone of disgust.

"Holding a kicker," Willy reassured him with a wink at Polly.

"Yes, he is! He's the foolish guy, Willy is! That's what makes him so thin. Anyone can——"

"How many do *you* want?" interrupted Joe anxiously.

"Well,—just for fun—I'm going to play them as they fell."

"No! Poker's a rotten game!" said Joe furiously. "And me with threes. You can't beat my luck! I'm a damned fool to play the game at all! I bet a little one."

Polly rose to her feet, and, leaning over the table, examined the pot with anxious care. "It must be a *very* little one. I can't see it at all."

"Oh, hang it all! Lend me a white one, somebody."

"I think it's my first bet," said Merrick.

"Of course it is. But Joe just loves to put up."

"I'm feeling reckless myself. Before I even look again, I'm going to bet a white."

"Ah, dear!" sighed Willy. "Mine are too small, after all."

"And ten," said Polly when it came her turn.

Once again Joe examined his cards with as much care as if he were seeing them for the first time. "I—er—you stood pat?"

"I—er—did."

"I—er—oh, what's the use? You can't beat my kind of luck! You call her, Merrick." He threw his hand angrily clear across the table.

"Sorry I don't feel able to," laughed Bob.

"But I drew to a middle straight—and didn't make it." He, too, threw down his hand. Polly burst into a perfect peal of laughter and put out her hand for the pot.

"You didn't let her—— Well, I, for one, am fed up for to-day!" Joe shoved his chair back with an angry scowl.

"What did you have, Polly?" asked Hilda, stifling a yawn.

"Just a flush." As she put her cards down, Joe grabbed them, spreading them out face up on the table that everyone might see them. His face had an expression of positive horror.

"Flush!" He pointed dramatically at the cards. There were four diamonds and a spade.

"Why, the other diamond must be the one you've been promising me for so long, dear. No wonder I was one shy! Your cards, Mr. Merrick."

Everyone laughed uproariously but Joe.

"I tell you I'm going to quit while I have the price of a dinner," he stormed.

"Just around once," urged Polly, more to tease him than because she really wanted to keep on playing. She had been extraordinarily lucky.

"No, no!" protested Willy. "Enough's a plenty. Besides, I want my dinner. You're a smart kid, Polly. Let's quit."

"Just ten out of a hundred!" Joe tossed

his two chips to Willy, who was acting as banker.

"Thirty dollars," said Bob, cashing in in his turn.

"Willy, I owe you twenty dollars." Hilda handed him a small stack of whites.

"One hundred and eighty-five, if you will be so kind." This, of course, was Polly. "Not bad for three-quarters of an hour. But every little bit helps."

"I don't see that it ever helps *me* any! If you want a new hat to-morrow it's me that will have to put up for it," called Joe, who was stalking up and down the far end of the room.

"Why not? You wouldn't take a poor working girl's savings, would you?"

"Come on, Hilda," said Willy, getting heavily on his feet, "let's go to dinner. I'm so hungry I couldn't count the spots. That's why I had to quit. What's the idea of waiting any longer?"

"I can't go just yet," said Hilda in a troubled tone. "The maid's out and Mary hasn't a key. She won't be much longer, poor kid. I can't go till she gets back."

"Now look here," grumbled Willy, who always became peevish when he was hungry, like any other spoiled child. "I've never kicked at your taking in a stranger and grub-staking her, but that's no reason why I should have to wait

for my dinner until she chooses to come in. I've done a hard day's work, and I'm hungry."

"It isn't eight o'clock yet. She won't be long," said Hilda soothingly.

With a protesting shake of the head, Willy sank back in his chair and mopped his perspiring forehead.

"This weather's fierce. Not a chance to sleep a night like this! I tell you what: let's get in the car after dinner and beat it down to Atlantic City for over Sunday."

"At that time of night? Willy, you're crazy!"

"I'm nothing of the sort. We could stop over in Lakewood—we'd make it by midnight—and take a nice early run to the shore."

"Sounds good to me," said Polly, who was devoting her talents to solitaire. "You'll join us, Merrick?"

"Hardly!" said Merrick, crossing over and resting his arm on the mantelpiece. "I'd be sort of an odd spoke in the wheel, wouldn't I? Moonlight rides are all right, but not for the extra man."

"I can't go either, Willy," said Hilda hurriedly. "I can't very well leave Mary here alone without letting her know."

"What's the matter with taking the kid with us? Then there wouldn't *be* an extra man."

He looked steadily at Hilda. She understood

his meaning only too well. She put up her hand as if to ward off a blow. No one spoke. It was as if everyone were waiting for her answer.

It was Polly who came to her rescue. "Great scheme, Willy," she said soberly, "only it won't work."

"Why won't it? The little country girl is all right, if she gets a chance; eh, Merrick?"

"That's just the trouble," said Polly in the same level tone. "The 'little country girl' *is* all right."

"Meaning?" demanded Willy with irritation that was only partly assumed.

"That she happens to be on the level. That's all."

"Where do you get that sort of talk! Aren't we all on the level?"

"Are we?"

Willy made an angry gesture, and, pulling himself up by the arms of his chair, went over and stood by Bob Merrick.

"She'd go, all right, if you two girls would put it to her strong. If you ask me, I guess she's had about enough of this tramping the streets, looking for a job! She's had a chance to see something better since you took her in. I tell you what I'll do: I'll bet you fifty she won't refuse."

"She'd be a fool if she did," chimed in Joe,

who was always ready to follow his friend's lead.

"Wait a minute," said Hilda, flashing a look of gratitude at Polly from her dark eyes. "I'm no saint. I don't have to tell any of you that. But I'm strong for Mary Horton, because she's the kind I don't see much of any more, and because she's from my old home town." Her voice broke a little. Polly came over and put a friendly, encouraging hand on her shoulder.

"Well, what's all this fuss about, anyway?" asked Willy with an air of injured innocence. "The girl likes Merrick, here. She told you that herself. Why should you object if they get to be—well, good friends?"

"That isn't it. It isn't that I am going to object to anything she does. Only everything must be on the level. And I tell you straight, Willy, that if she goes with us to Atlantic City, she's got to go dead wise to what it means. Now, understand that."

"Oh, I hate this sermon stuff!" said Willy in frank disgust. He went over and poured himself a fresh drink.

"You don't know what it means to me to have her here, Willy. She doesn't understand about me, but she must think it queer that she never hears the folks back home talk of me. And you can be sure they don't—before her.

I think she was a little frightened at first at the idea of coming. But she didn't want to hurt my feelings."

"Ha, ha, ha! Kind of her, wasn't it?" scoffed Willy.

"You don't see that, do you, Willy? But it was. She's come here to New York with the idea of making a living and helping to take care of her mother. Good Lord! The poor kid!"

"She's got a swell chance!" commented Joe.

"I guess she's beginning to realize that. I tried to help her. Polly and I have given her a lot of sewing that we didn't really want done. And I got Jim Carroll to give her some posing to do. But the second day he—she never said much about it, but she wouldn't go back! She's sent nearly every cent she has made home. But she'd never dare tell that she had posed for an artist, and I asked her not to say that she was working for me. So she's deceiving her mother, or at least kept back part of the truth in saying that she was doing sewing for a lady by the name of Mrs. Merrill."

"All right," said Willy. "I'll say no more. She may get six a week in a dairy lunch, if she's lucky. Perhaps that would be better than this, but——" He made a sweeping gesture, which took in the pretty room and its contents.

"Perhaps!" agreed Hilda wearily. "I don't know. I couldn't do it. I don't say she can. I don't mean to preach. I've made mess enough of my own life, Heaven knows! But what I *do* mean is this: if she's going to Hell, I'm going to see that she goes with her eyes wide open. I don't want her to miss any of the scenery!"

"They say that it all depends on the girl," said Polly thoughtfully. "I wonder! And I wonder if it would pay her to go through with it, if she could."

"You must feel better now that you've got that off your chest," said Joe sarcastically.

"I think you are right, Miss—er—Miss Newton," said Bob Merrick, speaking for the first time. "I, too, like your friend Mary. But I agree with you. If she makes up her mind to go to—shall we say Atlantic City?—she's got to go knowing exactly what it means, if she goes with me."

"Ain't this the moral little bunch? My, my!" exclaimed Willy.

"You know I'm out for a good time, Morgan. But you must count me out of your party unless the young lady in question decides to join us of her own free will."

At this Willy was more injured than ever. He actually looked as if he were about to weep. "A person would think I was in the business of kidnapping great big husky dolls like that!"

"We're a fine bunch of little playmates!" laughed Polly. "Every time we get together we make the Kilkenny Cats look like that old woodcut of the Happy Family!"

"Just a moment, Willy," said Hilda. "I don't want you to think I'm getting soft over this kid, but I want to show you something. I'll be back in a minute."

"I don't know what to make of that girl lately," said Willy crossly, looking after her retreating figure, "but she ain't like herself at all. She wants to look out she don't lose her meal ticket," he added coarsely.

This was too much for Polly. She turned on Willy with blazing eyes. "Don't let that worry you, Mr. Morgan. Hilda's a queen! And there are others with eyes in their heads. And some of them," she finished with biting emphasis, "ain't quite so fat nor so old!"

Willy's face purpled with resentment at this plain speech. But if there was anything in the world for which he had a genuine respect it was Polly's tongue. He wisely made no attempt to reply, and, crossing the room, began to talk with Merrick in a low tone.

It was only a few moments before Hilda came back, holding an open letter in her hand.

CHAPTER V

"HERE's a letter which she left open on her dressing-table. I know I had no business to read it, but I was hungry to hear something about the old place. I'm going to read it to you. It's from her mother."

"I'll stand for it if I must," said Willy sulkily. "But I've got to have another drink first."

"Here!" said Polly, pushing the little tabouret over beside him. "Take the whole works, and have a good time all by yourself. Go on, Hilda."

"Anyone else want a drink before the sob stuff starts?" asked Willy.

Merrick shook his head.

"I'm cutting down on the booze," said Joe virtuously.

"He had to do it," explained Polly dryly. "They're charging twenty cents for highballs most everywhere lately!"

"'My dear little daughter,'" Hilda began. "'I am wondering as I sit here to-night what my little girl is doing way off there in the great city. Wondering and hoping—not fearing—because I know that no matter what evil might

creep around her, her pure eyes would never see it.' "

"It must be great to have a mother," said Polly softly.

"Mine died years ago, thank God!" said Hilda fiercely.

"I never had one, not to know it. An orphan asylum is a grand place to bring up a kid. But read the rest of it."

"It's long. I don't want to bore you."

"Oh, that's all right," Polly reassured her. " Mr. Merrick doesn't look as if he were bored, Willy is asleep again, and Joe is taking a mental trial balance. He's afraid he owes himself money. Go on."

" 'I cried over the money you have sent me from time to time. Every penny of it earned by the stitches taken by your soft little fingers! You must not worry about me, dear. Doctor——' " For a moment the reader stopped. " 'Doctor Simpson assures me that I am better, and you know that Doctor Simpson never, never——' " Again Hilda stopped.

"What is it, Hilda?"

"Nothing; only I knew him—once. He's about five years older than I am, this doctor. We were kids together. He was away at college when I—when I left home. It seems sort of funny to be hearing of him again. I——"

She wiped her eyes defiantly, conscious that

Bob Merrick was watching her with a strange expression new to his face.

The sudden silence roused Willy. He yawned prodigously, his fat hands on his stomach.

"Let's go get something to eat. What do you say?"

"No wonder you make such a hit with the girls, Willy," said Polly. "You have *such* a poetic nature!"

"I am interested in the letter, Hilda," said Merrick quietly.

"There isn't really much more. She speaks about another old friend of mine, a Horace Worth. He wants to be Mary's sweetheart, I guess. I never could bear him, myself, although he's supposed to be the salt of the earth. He's the cashier of the bank and superintendent of the Sunday school."

"That's a rotten combination," volunteered Joe, with sudden interest. "That bank wouldn't get any of *my* money."

"I'd like to see anybody that *could,*" said Polly, *sotto voce.*

"The letter ends like this, and this is the part that I really wanted to read you. Listen a minute longer, Willy. And please, *please,* don't laugh at it. 'They say that the world is a wicked place, but I haven't found it so. I have faith to believe that kind hands will be stretched out to help you. That wise eyes will

be on the lookout to warn you of dangers in your path. God bless the friends who bring comfort to my lonely little girl! God keep the ones who *help her on her way!*'"

Hilda read the closing words with marked emphasis. Again silence fell on the room. Hilda looked up to meet Bob Merrick's steady gaze. It was Willy who recalled them to the important business of the moment.

"Don't we *ever* eat!"

"Bless the man, his kind heart is touched!" Polly went over and attempted to shake his hand.

But Willy wouldn't have it. He jerked away his hand pettishly. "Don't act like a fool, Polly, if you can help it! I'm sorry for the girl, of course. We all are."

"Sure we are!" said Joe heartily.

Polly was down his throat in a moment. "Let's make up a purse for her! I'll put you down for a hundred, Joe."

"Don't act crazy! A hundred!" Joe rose hastily from his chair with real agitation.

"Don't worry. I just wanted to see your face. You're handsome when you're scared." But she saw that both Willy and Joe would be anything but pleasant companions if they were made to wait much longer for their dinner. "Come on," she said gayly, "I'll make a cocktail. Who'll crack the ice?"

"*Now* you're talking like a sensible human being," approved Willy. "We'll all take a drink, and then we'll go to dinner. You can leave the key with the hallboy, Hilda."

"Come on, Mr. Merrick," called Polly from the doorway, "help me with the cocktails."

"All right. I'm your man."

"That's the talk," said Joe with enthusiasm. "She makes a great cocktail, Merrick."

"So sweet of you to say so, Joe. And of course they *are* cheaper. You'd better come along. I'll find something for you to do."

"Hilda," said Willy earnestly—he was now thoroughly wide awake—"I've got my reasons for wanting to be especially friendly with Bob Merrick. That's why I bring him round so much."

"I knew of course you had *some* reason. You always do!" said Hilda bitterly.

"Business. Now the best way to be friendly with him is to give him a good time. I want you to forget all about that letter, Hilda. I want you to get that little girl to go down to Atlantic City with us."

"I'm only sorry I read it to you. I might have known it wouldn't mean anything to you!"

"He's met the kid half a dozen times, and I know he's taken a shine to her, for some reason or other. If it wasn't for her, he wouldn't

be here so much. He's just ripe to fall for a clever girl."

"*Why* is he?" asked Hilda curiously.

"Well, he's been working his head off ever since he was a boy, prospecting up in Canada. There was a girl that he was mad about. But she wouldn't wait. Threw him, like a fool, just a month before he made his strike. Naturally, he's sore now. Swears he'll never marry. Hates every woman that was ever born. Ain't that just pie for a clever girl?"

"What's in it for you?"

"A plenty. He'll let his friends in right. And he's got a great property. Joe and I made sure of that. I could get the promoting of the whole deal, if I could get close enough to him. The kid thinks a whole lot of you, as she should. Between you, you could work it."

"I won't do it, Willy."

"You've got to."

"No. I won't block your game, I promise that much. She shall choose for herself. But I won't help you. I can't."

"I'm going to talk straight to you. I've been a good thing for you, given you a lot. I'm willing to keep on giving. But I won't stand for any double-cross!"

Hilda struck her hands together violently. "Once more I tell you that I'll stand aside. I won't hinder you, but I won't help you."

"Why, look here! Do you mean to tell me that a few months of plenty, decent clothes and things have swelled your head that bad? Do you want to go back to ten hours a day behind the glove counter?"

"And that's all I mean to you! After a year and a half."

"Now can the emotional stuff. I like you all right. I guess I've proved that. But I won't let any woman make a fool of me. It ain't often that I do business after office hours, but this is one of the times. And you've *got* to go through."

"Or?"

"Or it's all off."

His face was grim with purpose. For a long moment, she sat staring up at him as he loomed big and threatening above her chair. Then, with a little shudder, which the man interpreted as a sign of surrender, she dropped her eyes. A faint smile of triumph just touched the corners of his thick lips. Still looking at her, he took a big cigar from his pocket and lighted it. The electric bell of the front door tittered loudly. Hilda gave a little nervous scream and sprang to her feet.

"There she is now."

"I'll go," said Willy, pushing her not ungently back into her chair. He went out into the little entrance hall and opened the door.

It was Mary, but a Mary more tired and worn than he had ever seen her. She was pale with fatigue, but her eyes were feverishly bright. Under her arm she carried a crumpled evening paper. She acknowledged Willy's courtesy with a wan smile.

"You're—you're late, Mary," said Hilda huskily.

"Yes."

"And tired," said Willy, with a smile that was intended to be fatherly.

Her answering smile scarcely parted her lips. She gave a pathetic little gesture of assent, and dropped into a chair by the table where they had been playing.

"Any luck, dear?" asked Hilda yearningly.

She shook her head without looking up.

"See if that cocktail is ready, Hilda," said Willy in a low tone. And, as she hesitated for a moment, he added, still lower: "Beat it!"

She went slowly, without looking back, out to the dining-room, Polly's shrill laughter cutting the silence for a moment when she opened the door. Willy waited until he heard the door close. Then he went over and sat down opposite Mary. Her eyes were closed. She sat with her head leaning upon her hand. But as Willy creaked into his chair, she opened them again. He still wore his paternal smile.

"Hungry?"

"I—I think so."

"When did you eat?"

"I had a cup of coffee before either of the girls were up."

"No lunch?"

"No."

Willy's face expressed genuine horror. He took a fat roll of bills from his trousers pocket. "Good God! It would kill me! Here, kid, I'll stake you."

"Oh, no, thank you."

"Sure?"

"Quite."

"Pride's all right," he said, putting the bills slowly back, "but I'm a rich man."

"I know." She sat up with sudden energy. "I read about you in this evening paper. It explained a lot that I haven't understood. It spoke about your great success in business, and —it spoke about—about your wife, Mr. Morgan."

"Well?"

"It is all so new to me, so different."

"I dare say."

"Then you have a home here in New York. You—you live here?"

"I wouldn't live any place else."

"And Hilda, Hilda doesn't seem *bad.*"

"She's an ace."

"I had heard, of course, about things like this. I had even heard things about Hilda, back home. Vague things that I didn't understand. It's all so queer, somehow. You know I had letters to people here in New York—good people. Not one of them had as much as a word of kindness for me. And Hilda—whom I hardly even remembered—took me into her home. Offered to share with me. Clothes, money, everything!"

"The trouble is," said Willy slowly, "that they teach you back there in the country that there are two kinds of folks in the world, the 'good' and the 'bad.' That dope is wrong. There *are* two kinds, that's true. But it's the 'ups' and the 'downs.' A strong man can beat the game sometimes. I did. But a girl can't. If she's not born with a silver spoon in her mouth, believe me, kid, she hasn't got a chance."

"I think I've found that out for myself."

"There's a lot more you could find out if you have the nerve! There's just one way that a girl like you, or Hilda, or little Polly, or any of the rest, can get their share of good things."

"I believe that, too. I've seen enough lately to be *forced* to believe it. But is it worth the price? I don't think so."

"You don't know much about it, though, do you? How much have you ever known of the

fun of life? The good food, the pretty clothes, the swell cars, the gay restaurants, the lovely shows?"

"Nothing!"

"I like you, kid," said Willy, rising and laying a friendly, if heavy, hand on her shoulder, "and I'm going to be your friend, I'm going to show you *some* of the bright spots, and I'm going to start right now. We are all going out to dinner, and you are going to have your first peep at a real swell little time."

"Thank you, Mr. Morgan, but I can't. I'm too tired and I—I can't!"

"Course you can," cried Willy encouragingly. "It's just what you need. Come on, buck up, be a good little sport!"

"Please, Mr. Morgan, please don't ask me any more. I—I don't seem to know myself tonight, and *please* don't ask me any more!"

For a moment, she made an heroic effort at self-control, but the fatigue and the excitement of the discoveries she had made for herself, crowned by Willy's frank revelations, were too much for her overtaxed nerves. She broke down and cried miserably, her face buried in her hands.

"Here you are, Willy," said Hilda, coming in with a tray on which stood a silver cocktail shaker and a glass.

"Mary! What's wrong?"

"Tired, that's all," Willy answered for her. "Here, stand still, can't you?"

He filled the glass from the shaker, and carried it carefully over to Mary.

"Take this, kid."

At the sound of her friend's voice, Mary uncovered her face, and began to dab at her eyes with her handkerchief. She gave a little hysterical laugh as she watched Willy coming towards her, his eyes glued to the glass in his efforts not to spill a drop.

"No, thank you," she managed to say when she could find her voice.

"She never had a drink in her life, Willy," protested Hilda.

"I tell you she's all in. Go to it, kid!"

Suddenly, Mary's whole expression changed. A new light of resolution glowed in her eyes. She held out her hand for the glass.

"After all, why not?"

"That's right. Why not?" Willy encouraged her. Hilda turned away.

Mary took nearly half of the fiery liquor at a swallow. Coughing and choking, she set the half empty glass down on the table at her side. Willy looked on in frank envy.

"Gee! I'd give a thousand dollars for a drink that would make me cough like that!" he said with unmistakable fervor.

"I don't like it!" protested Mary.

"Of course you don't," said Hilda, coming over and laying an affectionate hand on her shoulder. "You're all tired out, Mary. Come and lie down in your room, and I'll make you a cup of tea."

"There isn't time," said Willy shortly. "She's coming out to dinner with us."

"Oh, no, I can't do that."

"Sure you can. Just we three and Polly and Joe and Mr. Merrick. A nice swell little party. Then we men will dress at the club while you girls change, and we'll all go for a nice ride."

"Change!" said Mary bitterly. "I'd look nice in a restaurant, wouldn't I? In this dress!"

"That's easy. Hilda's about your build, and she's plenty of duds. Rig her out right, Hilda. Remember!" he added in a lower tone, "I'll put it up to you."

But for the last time, Hilda defied him. "Mary, I beg——" she began.

"I'm going!" Mary interrupted her. Her childish mouth was set. Her eyes were on Willy.

"You want to go?"

"Yes."

"Mary, are you sure?" Hilda's voice was a sort of wail.

"Yes. I'm sure."

"Come to my room. I'll help you dress."

Hilda's voice was lifeless. Without looking behind her, she left the room.

"You're the game little kid, all right, all right!"

"Am I? I wonder!"

A faint shadow of trouble darkened the new brilliancy of her flower-like face. Was she going to change her mind again? Smilingly Willy pointed to the glass at her elbow. With a little laugh, she picked it up and drained it. This time she didn't choke, although her eyes filled with tears. Still laughing, she wiped them with the corner of her handkerchief, and looked up to see Bob Merrick standing in the dining-room door.

And his look could not have been called one of approval.

CHAPTER VI

Willy, following her quick glance, saw him at almost the same moment. A clever diplomat knows when to efface himself.

"Hello! You two have a chat until Hilda is ready. I've just *got* to have my cocktail." And he beat a retreat to the dining-room.

"I thought you didn't go in for that sort of thing," said Merrick, coming slowly over to the table, glancing meaningly at the empty glass.

"I thought so, too. I find that a great many of my ideas are changing," she retorted, with a pertness that was not usual with her.

"It's this damned city. You'd better get out of it."

"I can't. There wasn't any room for me back there. I thought there would be here."

"No? I love the open places myself. I've lived in 'em all my life. I couldn't breathe here for long. But women seem to be different. I suppose you thought the country lonely."

"Lonely!" she said with genuine emotion. "I never knew what the word meant till I came here. You read a lot about the loneliness of the country. But the loneliness of these crowded streets!"

"Yes," he said. But his tone suggested that he was not really listening to her. He stood looking at her gravely, with a puzzled frown.

"Well?"

"You're different, somehow, to-night. I've never seen you like this. There's a new look in your eyes."

"Is there?"

"Yes. You don't look frightened any more. You've always had a little pitiful look, like a child who saw things without understanding them. You look more like a woman, somehow."

"I am changed. I thought when I came to New York, I had found my wonderful chance. I'm beaten, and in six weeks."

"I wouldn't give up. Six weeks isn't a *very* long time, after all."

"It's the truth that's beaten me," she said soberly. "I've found that the world isn't what I thought it was. That's what's changed me."

"We all have times like that. They're dangerous times. Get a good night's sleep, and try again to-morrow."

She shook her head, with a little wistful smile. "Things won't be any different to-morrow."

"Even then, I advise a good night's rest. And in the morning: borrow enough money from me to take you back home."

"I can't go back home. I've got to stay. I've *got* to make money and send it back to my

mother. And I'm going to do it. I'm going to live," she went on with rising excitement. "I'm going to have my share of the good things of life, no matter how I get it."

"You don't know what you're saying."

"Oh, yes, I do. I'm going out to-night with the rest of you. I'm going to put on a pretty dress like the other girls. And I'm going to laugh when you laugh, and live as you live. The old way beat me. I'm going to try the new."

He saw that he would have to take another tack. He paced the length of the room several times, finally coming back once more to seat himself at the table. One of her pretty slender hands was lying on it. He covered it with his.

"Let me tell you a little something about myself. I haven't lived the life these other men have. I have been working out in the clean air, where things look different, until just a little while ago. I fought for years against poverty. And when I'd won my fight, I found the girl I'd been working for had married another man. Then I knew that I'd been a fool to sacrifice every pleasure in life for nothing. And I swore I'd go out and buy the happiness I'd starved so long for. There's no faith in either man or woman left in me. I no longer have any ambition; only the determination to enjoy to the limit the pleasures that my money can buy. I——"

"And why not?" she interrupted eagerly. "That's what all men do, isn't it? We are alike, you and I, in one thing. We've always had to do without. And now, life beckons us——"

"Let me finish. I was going to add that I can't trust *myself*. And I don't want you to trust me! Mary, I beg of you; please, please don't go to-night!"

For a moment she hesitated, and he thought that he had not made his appeal in vain. Then he made a stupid mistake, led into it by seeing the old childish, questioning look, which in spite of his boasted cynicism, aroused every bit of chivalry in his nature.

"That's a good child," he said, patting her hand. "If I were you I'd turn in early."

The word "child" decided it. Our destinies turn on such trivial things! She was not to be patronized and treated like a baby. She would show him that once for all.

"I don't see what difference it can possibly make to you," she said icily. And then, with a sort of imitation of Polly's flippancy which was so palpable that it would have amused him if it had not hurt him: "You won't have to speak to me if you don't want to. You won't even have to look at me. Although I'll be much more worth looking at, in one of Hilda's pretty gowns, than I've ever been before!"

"MARY, BELIEVE ME. I LIKE YOU SO MUCH THAT . . . ."

"You don't know what you're doing."

"Yes, I do. At least, I know what I'm *going* to do. I'm going to dinner, and for a nice ride —my very first—in an automobile. And you," with a coquettish look, "are going with me."

"I——"

"Aren't you?"

"Mary, believe me. I like you so much that——"

"Hilda's waiting for you, kid," called Willy from the doorway. "I helped her pick out a dress myself. It's a dream. Come on. Hustle!"

"She isn't going, Morgan."

"Yes, I am." Mary sprang from her chair, and ran lightly over to Willy's side.

"Mr. Merrick doesn't seem especially anxious to have me," she said, affecting to whisper. "But"—she swept Merrick a mocking courtesy —"I'm going just the same!" And she ran out of the room.

"It's a damned shame, Morgan."

"Why is it?" Willy's innocent air was a thing to see!

"The girl is frightened, that's all. She's lost her head for the time being. If we help her through this, she will be safe. If we don't——"

"Don't be a fool," said Willy roughly, dropping the mask. "I did that once when I was

about your age. There was a girl—and I let her go! It's a funny thing, but it comes back to me all the time; the thought of the girl I let go. It's the keenest regret of my life!"

"Don't, man, don't!" Merrick made no pretense of concealing his disgust.

"Ah, wait a while," retorted Willy with a wise wag of his head. "You're too young to understand. Women don't mean much in a man's life until he's fifty. *Then* they begin to count. Take it from me, Bob, if you're on the level about meaning to enjoy yourself, women are heaven. But one woman is hell!"

"Well," said Polly, in imitation of Willy's tone, as she came in followed by Joe, "do we eat?"

"We're waiting for Mary to get dressed." Willy's voice was oily with sly triumph.

"She's going?" Polly's voice was sharp.

"Sure, she's going."

"That's fifty you owe me." Joe was positively radiant. Polly paid no attention to him. But she looked at Willy with something like admiration.

"I might have known. I've got to hand it to you, Willy."

"Do we take that ride to Atlantic City?" Joe asked.

"Sure we do. We can make Lakewood in three hours."

"Easy. I did it in three and a half, last Tuesday, in that little runabout I bought."

"What!" The word "runabout" was the trumpet that roused Polly from her sad little dream. Joe muttered a fervid curse.

"So you've been buying little runabouts? No wonder I didn't get that bracelet!"

"Just a little car for the kid."

"He buys a runabout for a ten-year-old schoolgirl, and I have to do without necessities!" Polly's tone suggested latent tragic talent.

"Oh, I'll get the damned bracelet!"

"That isn't it," said Polly reprovingly. "It's the way you *try* to deceive me!" She hid an impish grin behind her fan.

"I have to do something once in a while to square myself at home, don't I? Lord! the way I get it, coming and going!" He sank into a chair consumed with self-pity.

"I knew when you sent me a check yesterday that you had something on your conscience."

"Oh, let up, can't you?" pleaded the culprit.

"Very well. I'll never mention the subject again. The bracelet is at Tiffany's." The door opened and Hilda came slowly into the room, fastening her glove.

"Is she ready?" asked Willy.

"Not quite," she said coldly, without glancing at him.

"Great goodness, I'm about starved. Do get your cloak and hustle the kid along."

"Very well." As she left the room, the door-bell sounded sharply.

"Hello!" said Polly. "You didn't send me flowers, did you, Joe?"

"I *did* not."

"Then it must be that hat of mine, C. O. D. The maid's out to-night. Pay for it, Joe, like a good boy."

"New hat? This is my lucky day!"

He went reluctantly out into the little hall and opened the door. A man with a strong, hard face and cold gray eyes, whose severe black suit had never been cut by a city tailor, stood on the threshold.

"Mrs. Merrill?" he asked politely.

"Oh, yes." Joe didn't ask him to come in. He stood with his hand on the door and called in to Polly.

"Gentleman wants to see Mrs. Merrill."

"What is it? She's dressing. Won't I do?" said Polly, coming forward.

The stranger waited long enough before answering to take Polly in from head to foot with a cold and disapproving glance. "I'm sorry to trouble you, but my errand is vitally important. There is a young girl here, Mary Horton. She is working here, I believe, sewing for a Mrs. Merrill. I come from her mother, at her home,

Great Falls. My name is Worth. I must ask you to let me see her."

"Will you come in?" said Polly. "I'll call Mrs. Merrill."

Mr. Worth bowed, and followed her into the room. Crossing to the opposite door, she called, "Hilda, Hilda!"

"All right. I'll be there in a minute."

Whether it was at the name "Hilda," or at the sound of the voice, Mr. Worth's manner became, if possible, stiffer than ever. He declined the chair which Willy proffered him, and remained standing just within the doorway. His thin-lipped mouth tightened grimly. From under heavy eyebrows, his cold eyes swept the room and the three men in dinner dress, to return to Polly's white neck and throat. No one spoke after Polly had assured him that Mrs. Merrill would be with him presently.

"Well?" Hilda stood in the doorway. But on the instant, her expression of polite inquiry changed to one of surprised consternation.

"You!"

Worth's lips parted in a smile of such insolent contempt that Bob Merrick's fists closed automatically. Even Willy flushed with angry indignation, and Joe got to his feet.

"So *you're* called 'Mrs. Merrill,' are you?" With a sudden fury, he took a step toward her. "What is Mary Horton doing here with you?"

"You haven't changed since I used to know you, Horace," said Hilda in a low, bitter tone.

"Mary is mad to work for a creature like you! Where is she?"

"Just a minute, please," called Mary's fresh young voice. "I'm sorry to be so long."

Horace Worth gave a sort of groan, and closed his eyes. His mouth contracted with pain.

When he opened them, it was to see Mary, radiant, her eyes sparkling with pleasure, dressed in a beautiful evening gown, come into the room. As she paused for a second, bashfully conscious of her fine feathers, it chanced that Joe was between her and that fateful figure confronting Hilda.

"Did you think I was never coming?" she laughed. But her glance rested on Merrick, standing with his back to the light. Perhaps he wouldn't be so sorry that she was coming now that he saw her transformed into a butterfly!

"Mary!"

Her glance, at the sound of that harsh voice, flew to his. Her hand went to her throat. All the happy light died out of her face.

"Why are *you* here?" she demanded.

He did not answer her. Instead, he started for the door.

"Wait! Why did you come here?"

With his hand on the door-knob, he turned and glowered at her.

"I had a message. You wouldn't care to hear it."

"From home?"

"From Doctor Simpson."

"Mother!" she cried in terror.

"Is dying!" he said brutally. "She asked for you. I offered to come. The doctor said it was her only chance."

"I'm coming. I won't be a minute!" She half turned toward the door, her hands fumbling blindly with the fastenings of her gown. The tears were streaming down her face.

"You needn't!"

"What do you mean? What do you mean?" Her voice was shrill and high. She made a violent gesture of protest.

"I mean that I won't *let* you go! You! You're not fit to go to her!"

"You brute!" said Hilda in a low tone.

"Wait a minute, please," said a quiet voice, and Bob Merrick came forward from the window.

"Who is this chump, anyway?" demanded Joe, of nobody in particular. Even Willy began to pull himself up from his chair.

"I don't want to talk to you—any of you," said Worth roughly, but it was at Merrick that he looked. "I came here for her because I

thought it was my duty. I see now that it is my duty to make sure that her mother never sees her face again!"

"You are making a hideous mistake. This girl is all right," said Merrick.

"All right!" Worth gave a sneering laugh.

"Straight, Horace. Dead straight. So help me God!" Any man not blinded by passion and prejudice would have been convinced by Hilda's earnestness. But Horace Worth was not that man.

"*Look* at her!" he jeered. "Look at that indecent dress she's wearing!"

"My clothes. Horace, you've *got* to believe me."

"Even then, who are *you* to judge her?" Merrick was exercising all of his self-control. Had Worth arrived on any other errand than the one which he said had brought him, the temptation to kick him down the stairs would have been overpowering.

"Who are *you*, when it comes to that. A man like you, fighting her battles. Why should *you* defend her?"

Mary had been sobbing her heart out on Polly's shoulder. But at this, she raised her head, and disengaging herself from her detaining clasp, came over to the door and faced her accuser. Her voice was broken. Every now and then, a sob caught her throat, which threat-

ened to choke her. But there was a determination in her eyes, and a compelling sincerity in her whole manner, that made even Horace Worth listen.

"You are right. He has no reason to defend me, no right. Nobody has any right. No more than you have to keep me from my mother. I don't say that I am fit to go to her. I don't say that I haven't sinned in my heart. But I am going. You can't stop me. You don't dare to stop me. You won't dare to face *her* without me. It would *kill* her to think the things about me that *you* think. But it wouldn't kill her love for me. You know that. I am all she has. No matter what I am, she loves me, my mother loves me!"

"And now," she said, turning to Hilda, "won't you all go, please? Horace will wait for me. He understands now that he must. It was my fault that you were kept waiting so long in the first place. I'm sorry. Please don't stay any longer on my account. Please, please, dear Hilda," she added in a whisper. "It will be easier for me. You and Polly shall hear as—as soon as I have any news."

"If you want me to, Mary, and if you are sure our going will help, but it seems heartless to——"

"No, no! I'm sure."

Hilda went over to Willy, and whispered in

his ear. "She hasn't a dollar, Willy. And money will help."

Willy took out the same roll of bills he had displayed earlier in the day with a more sinister purpose. But Worth had seen Hilda whisper to him. "She takes nothing from you—any of you. She has taken too much as it is. Put on a decent dress if you still have one," he went on, turning to Mary, "and be quick. I can't breathe this air for long."

"Then you'll take me to her?"

"Yes, I'll take you to her."

Hilda had motioned to the others that they would start. Willy, who was not generally quick at the uptake, had all he could do to keep from expressing his pleasure that dinner at last was, so to speak, in the offing. He contented himself with rubbing his stomach and winking at Joe. It was really shockingly late. Then, too, scenes always made him hungry.

As she heard Worth's ungracious promise, Mary ran swiftly across the room, and kissed both Polly and Hilda, and darted from the room.

Worth stepped aside to let Merrick open the door. Polly went out first, her head high in the air. The three men followed without a glance in his direction. Hilda came last. She bowed her head coldly without a word. Worth's answering salutation was even colder. On the

threshold, she paused a second. Her whisper was scarcely louder than a breath.

"Don't be more unkind to her than you can help, Horace."

The door closed. He was alone with his own unlovely thoughts.

CHAPTER VII

Mary had been home three weeks. The late afternoon sun came streaming pleasantly through the large bay-window, which looked out on the pretty old-fashioned garden, giving a cheering and warming touch to the simple homely sitting-room.

Deeply conscious of the great change which six short weeks of city life had wrought in herself, Mary felt a sort of childish wonder on finding that nothing had altered in the external aspect of even the least of the familiar objects which she had known from childhood, beyond the fact that everything—the house, the garden, the long, dusty Main Street of the village—had strangely shrunken during her absence. There is, at times, something positively terrifying about the implacable unchangeableness of inanimate things.

It might have been years since that morning when she had gone along that long street, now lying somnolent in its Sabbath calm, to take the train for New York. She wondered to find that her mirror disclosed no marked change in her fresh, young face. It could not be true, then, that Life marked one, as she had

always heard. But that there was a change more subtle than the placid mirror could reflect, she felt sure. More than once she had surprised the faint question in her mother's eyes. Trust her wise mother for noting a difference!

Just now, her mother was lying down. At least she supposed so. For the door of her bedroom was closed. It was always open when she was in another part of the house. What a load had fallen from her heart now that her mother was once more out of danger. The doctor had said that now it was only a question of time. But she must be tenderly watched, and kept from all unnecessary exertion. Especially must she be guarded from all worry.

Just how this was to be done was the problem which was confronting Mary just now. Her mother's illness had been a terrible strain on their slender resources. The doctor's bill, alone, must be appallingly large. Poor, they had always been. But they had never been in debt. She knew that the secret anxiety as to how her bills were to be paid was the thing that was retarding her mother's recovery. She simply *must* find some way to earn some money. But how, without going back to the city? Certainly there was nothing she could do at home. And yet she had small reason to hope that her luck would be any better should she return and try again. She went over the question

night after night, lying awake when her mother supposed her to be asleep. These wakéful nights were beginning to tell upon her. In spite of her best efforts to make believe to eat with her accustomed healthy appetite, she knew that her mother was not for a moment deceived.

The garden looked temptingly cool and pleasant. She would go out there and go over the whole question once more. As she crossed the dining-room, Sadie was already setting the table for supper. As Mary looked at her, in her neat Sunday dress, she thought again how really pretty she would be if only her expression was brighter. But with Sadie, gloom was a habit of long standing. "I'm going out in the garden for a while, Sadie. Take good care of mother. And remember, while she's better, she's not well, and keep her out of the kitchen."

"All right."

The table finished, Sadie came on into the sitting-room and began mechanically dusting the little "parlor organ," which was in no need of the attention.

"Ther moon was shinin' bright along ther Warbash,
On ther banks I smell ther smell er new mown hay,"

sang Sadie dolefully.

"Sadie! It's Sunday!" remonstrated the voice of Mrs. Horton.

"On Jordan's stormy banks I stand
And keep a wistful eye on——"

If greater dolefulness were possible, Sadie was attempting it.

Mrs. Horton came in through the dining-room with a certain air of guilt, unfastening a kitchen apron, which she wore over her black dress, as she came. She was a tiny little woman, briskly cheerful, whose face, in spite of its pallor and traces of illness, showed vitality and great strength of will.

"Here, Sadie," she said, holding out the telltale apron. "Hang this up for me, like a good girl."

"You've been in the kitchen again!" Sadie was coldly severe. "Let me tell you, in my opinion it's just as bad to bake a tea-cake on the Sabbath, and deceive people into thinkin' you're lyin' down restin', as it is to sing a worldly song!" said Sadie, taking the apron from her.

Mrs. Horton sank into a great arm-chair with a little, happy laugh.

"I know it! I'm ashamed of myself! But Mary isn't eating a thing. And she used to be so fond of my tea-cake."

"Doctor Simpson will have something to say when he knows you've been in the kitchen again!"

"Well, he isn't going to know it—neither is Mary! She'll never notice it's just baked."

Sadie shook her head sadly. "Ther sermon this mornin' was all about tellin' ther truth. It's a pity you missed it."

Mrs. Horton laughed again, her head against the back of the chair, her eyes closed.

"You seem to be in good sperits since you got out of your bed."

"Of course I'm happy. Mary is at home again."

"Well, if I'd been on my death-bed and was cured by a miracle, like ther doctor says *you* was, I'd be so grateful that I'd never smile again!" With which characteristic remark, Sadie withdrew to hide the incriminating apron.

For a time Mrs. Horton remained quiet, her eyes still closed. Looking at her so, one realized that it was the eyes that gave the whole character to her face. Once their indomitable light was hidden, she was nothing but a frail, little old woman. Suddenly, she crossed the room to the door leading to the garden, bright and alert once more.

"Mary! Mary, dear!"

"Yes, mother."

"Don't sit on the grass. It rained hard in the night."

"I'll come in," called Mary.

"Don't hurry, dear. It's lovely out of doors." She hurried back to her chair as Mary came up on the little porch.

"You didn't need to come in. I didn't mean that."

"I thought you were taking a nap. You look better, dear, but tired," said Mary, a little anxious frown puckering her forehead.

"Of course I'm better," said her mother stoutly. "I've been getting better every single minute since I opened my eyes and saw you standing there beside my bed."

Mary sat down on the arm of the chair, and put her arm across her mother's shoulder. "I wish I'd never gone away from you," she said in a low tone.

"It seemed like you had to go. And I got along all right. Sadie was a big help."

Mary gave a little sigh. "We can't afford to have even a girl who works just for her keep unless—unless I decide to go back."

"You're thinking of it?" Mrs. Horton tried to keep the anxiety out of her voice.

Mary got up, and brought over a little footstool and seated herself at her mother's feet.

"I don't know *what* to do," she said slowly. "I wish I could stay here with you. You don't know how much I wish it, but how can I?"

"It's the doctor's bill that worries you, I know," said Mrs. Horton sadly. "He was here such a lot. He won't even ask for it, I know. But I never owed a penny before in all my born days!"

"I'll pay him somehow, so far as money can ever pay him. He saved your life."

"He's a good doctor, but"—a smile broke over her mother's face—"it was you that did that. Queer things happen sometimes when folks are real sick, like I was. That night when they'd about given me up, although you weren't here, I was with you, just the same."

"You were delirious, mother, dear."

"I know; at least I suppose I was, but it was all very queer. I knew everything that was going on. I could see Doctor Simpson sitting by the table, and poor Sadie, standing by the window, crying her eyes out. It was Saturday night, just about dark, a little later than this. I was perfectly conscious, when, all of a sudden, I began to dream."

"About—about me?"

"Yes. And about—about some danger you were in. I'd never worried about you before. But it seemed awful clear that night."

Mary was shaken with a sort of superstitious fear. She slid off her stool, and knelt by her mother's side.

"Just the night before I came home? Are you sure it was just that night, mother?"

"Of course I am," said Mrs. Horton positively. "I shall never forget it! It seemed like I was in a great, big, beautiful room. And you were there, dressed different from what I'd

ever seen you. And right in the middle of that room was a dreadful, big pit with flames coming up out of it. And you were walking towards it. Your eyes were blinded with a beautiful silk scarf, so's you couldn't see. And strange folks were with you, drawing you towards that awful place, talking kind to you, but sneering into your blind face. I called and called. But you couldn't hear me because their lying voices were in your ears. Then I started to pray—out loud, the doctor told me afterwards—and I prayed as I'd never prayed before. I prayed God to save you, and to let me live a little longer, because, like a foolish old woman, I thought that my little girl needed me!"

"Mother!"

"And then I heard the doctor say: 'She's coming; Mary's coming home. Horace Worth's bringing her. He's just telegraphed.' Then, I guess, I fell asleep. For the next thing I knew, I opened my eyes, and you were there, kneeling beside my bed. But I was still afraid, until I caught your hands and looked into your dear eyes. Then I knew that my girl had really come back to me—and safe!"

For a moment Mary was unable to speak. She buried her face in her mother's lap. When she raised it, her eyes were full of tears.

"Mother! You need never, never be afraid

for me again. In your dreams, or any other time!"

"My dear! It was the fever, I know. Still there are times when every mother's heart knows a sort of prophetic fear!" said Mrs. Horton, smoothing Mary's glossy hair.

"If there were more people like you in the world, mother, it would be easier to be good."

"Oh, the world's all right," said Mrs. Horton with confidence.

"Your world," said Mary, rising slowly to her feet. "I'm afraid you don't know much about the *real* one."

"Well, I like that! I guess I've kept my eyes open!"

"In this quiet, little country town."

"Anybody would think I was a hermit. I visited 'round quite a lot when I was a girl. *Once* I 'most went to Boston."

"I suppose, after all, it isn't *where* a person lives, it's *how* they live. Right here there is a lot of sin, mother; mean, hidden, vicious sin. But you've never seen it, because you never look."

"I don't miss much, do I? It keeps me busy looking at the sunshine. What's the use of poking round in the sky, trying to find a cloud?"

Mary made no comment on this philosophy.

After a short silence, Mrs. Horton changed the subject.

"I'm well enough to see my friends to-day, Mary. If Horace Worth calls, I want you to let me know."

"Yes, mother."

"He's been here every day, hasn't he?"

"Only to ask for you. He hasn't been in."

"Is there anything wrong between you two?" asked her mother anxiously.

"There's nothing between Horace and me, mother, right or wrong."

"Horace has loved you ever since you were a little girl."

"I'm sorry."

"Horace is a good man," urged Mrs. Horton. "All the Worths have been steady and dependable. He gets a good salary, too. And he's smart. He used to come often evenings while you were away, and sit and talk about you."

Still, Mary made no answer. Sadie came in, and went over to the bird-cage that hung in the window to give some seed to the canary.

"He was real thoughtful, too," went on Mrs. Horton. "He took Sadie to Wednesday evening prayer-meeting, 'most every week."

"Yes; we had an awful gay winter 'round here," said Sadie with a kind of dry hardness.

" 'Taint every man that would do it, Sadie," reproved Mrs. Horton.

"So he told me every night!"

"You might be a little more grateful."

Sadie wheeled round from the bird-cage so abruptly that the canary fluttered away from the seed cup.

"Grateful! My folks are as good as his, if I *am* workin' out! Wasn't his father an' mine in business together? Wasn't my father killed tryin' to save their store from burnin' down? Old Mr. Worth wasn't killed, was he? He *was* not! He was down on his knees, in a cool spot, prayin' to ther Lord to save ther store, while *my* father was up on ther roof, tryin' to do it himself."

"Sadie!"

"Oh, I ain't sayin' a word against their religion. I wouldn't. Only my folks is just as good as his. Only we ain't so practical!" She stalked from the room, her head in the air. Mary and her mother exchanged an amused glance.

Mrs. Horton was not long in returning to the charge. "Mary, are you sure you can't love Horace Worth?"

"I—I——" stammered Mary. She hated herself for blushing!

"There wasn't any man in New York that—that——"

"No man that I ever want to see again," said Mary fervently.

"Here's the doctor," called Sadie, sticking her head in from the kitchen door.

Mary turned towards the door, her face lighted with a welcoming smile. She was always glad to see the doctor; never more than at this moment.

One had only to glance at Doctor Simpson's face to understand why his patients had such blind confidence in him. In repose, it was serious, earnest, and forceful. Without any trace of conceit, it was plain that he was very sure of himself. He appeared older than his thirty-five years. His hair was beginning to gray about the temples. There were lines of sorrow round his mouth; lines which time alone had never stamped there. But when he smiled, as he was smiling now, all was changed. There was something so fresh and candid about his smile that it made his face almost boyish. In spite of a certain carelessness in his dress, and the unmistakable country cut of his worn suit, there was a certain distinction about his whole appearance.

"Good-evening, doctor."

"Good-evening, Mary."

He went at once to the table where Mrs. Horton was sitting. "How have we been to-day?"

"I'm perfectly well. You shouldn't come to

see me at all," protested that lady with a welcoming glance, notwithstanding, that belied the ungraciousness of her words.

"Good! I'm sure of it. But how could a poor country doctor live if he didn't make unnecessary visits?"

He put his bag on the table with a business-like air. "Sadie!" he called, "Take Mrs. Horton into the dining-room. And I want some boiling water; not hot—boiling."

"As if I weren't able to walk!" said his patient indignantly. She got briskly to her feet, and started for the other room. At the door, she paused to make another protest. "And I don't like to be all wrapped up in cloth like a mummy. I'm getting sick of it!"

"This is the last time. I give you my word."

"You've said that before."

He followed her into the dining-room, but returned in an instant, closing the door behind him.

"You must not let her do too much, Mary. And she must not worry. That above all."

"I do what I can, doctor."

"That isn't enough," he said with a suggestion of sternness. "You must see to it. No excitement. No grief. No worry."

"It's our not having any money. She thinks of that all the time. We've always been poor, but never in debt before."

"Debt's a bad thing. You must keep out of it."

Mary gave a short laugh. "There's *your* bill. I'm going to pay it somehow. But it's a debt, isn't it?"

"Not at all. I'm alone in the world, and I'm pretty well off for a place like this. Besides, I care a great deal for your mother."

"She won't have it that way, and I won't either. It's no use, I must go back to New York.

"You can't! You mustn't leave her." He paused for a moment, and then went on with slow reluctance. "I think I'd better tell you the truth."

"Doctor!"

"Your mother was on her death-bed three weeks ago. That she is alive to-day is a miracle. I was sitting beside her bed the last day you were in New York, waiting for the end, as we doctors so often have to do. I heard her cry out. I thought she was gone. But she was dreaming of you. Dreaming or—God knows, I don't."

"She told me," said Mary in so low a tone that he could scarcely catch it. He gave her a quick look. Her face had lost all its color, but her eyes met his unflinchingly.

"She thought you were in some danger."

"I was! I——"

"Don't tell me!" he said sharply. His gesture was that of a man warding off something. "And don't tell her. You couldn't look at me like that if you'd been really hurt. But *she* mustn't know anything at all. She couldn't stand it. Her heart has a chance, if we can go easy until she gets her strength back. But it isn't a big chance, even then. It's only her spirit that keeps her up. You can't leave her."

"What am I to do?"

"I have known you since you were a baby. Let me speak to you as if I were an older brother. Why don't you marry Horace Worth? It would make your mother so happy."

"There isn't anything I wouldn't do for her! But would it be right for me to marry Horace Worth when I never could love him? I'll do it if you say so. Someone has got to tell me what to do!"

He made a deprecating gesture. "I——"

"*Have* I the right to do it?" she insisted.

"Mary, I'm not a man, I'm a machine. Your mother's my patient. I'd sacrifice almost anybody for her. But I can't answer your question. I don't know enough about the human heart to tell you what love is. But life isn't worth very much without it."

"You've done without it."

"Perhaps that's why I don't dare to tell you to do the same. You'll have to fight that out alone."

He chose some instruments from his bag, and started for the dining-room once more. With his hand on the knob, he paused.

"You saw some Great Falls people there in New York, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Did anyone speak about having seen Hilda Newton?" His voice was quite steady, but he did not look in her direction.

"*I* saw her, doctor."

"You did! She—was well?"

"Yes."

"And—and happy?"

"Not altogether unhappy, I think. But I don't know. It was so hard for me to understand."

"If there is anything you could tell me about her that would let me think of her less—less sadly—I'd be glad to hear it."

He waited for her answer. Then, as none came, he turned his head slightly, and saw that the girl had gone over to the window and stood with her back to him, looking out into the garden. He could not tell that her eyes were brimming with tears. A faint hope, which had been in his face a moment before, died away.

The lines about his mouth seemed to deepen. His broad shoulders sagged a little, as if adjusting themselves to a burden.

Mary heard the door close softly behind him as he went in to her mother.

CHAPTER VIII

So it was Hilda, the big-hearted, generous Hilda, who was the sad heroine of the hidden romance in Doctor Simpson's life, at which her mother had sometimes vaguely hinted. How stupid she had been never to have guessed it before! But now, many little instances which had occurred during her stay in New York came back to her.

How often, when the conversation had turned on Great Falls and its people—and she recalled now that it was almost always Hilda who had led up to these conversations—had they seemed to talk more of Ned Simpson than of any other person. And, almost invariably, afterwards, Hilda would slip away and shut herself in her own room. And more than once Mary had noticed that her eyes showed signs of weeping when she returned. And *still,* she had been blind! Now that she thought of it, how suited they seemed to be to one another. In spite of the fact that she now clearly understood Hilda's mode of life, she, herself, was sufficiently broad-minded to think that her friend's nature was still unspoiled. Who was she to judge her? The chance of her mother's illness

was all that had saved her from a similar fate.

If only she could bring these two together again. He must have been an unformed boy when they parted. She remembered distinctly Hilda's saying that she had not seen him since the summer before he went away to get his education. Would any woman alive hesitate to choose between him and Willy! Certainly not Hilda. And Doctor Simpson? That, she realized, was another matter. Granted that he still loved Hilda, would he—would any man—be great enough to forgive her? Even her slight knowledge of the world taught her that there were some things that the best of men never really forgave.

"Ain't doctors devils! Ther way they mess folks around!" came Sadie's voice from the doorway.

"He's the best man in the world!" said Mary stoutly. But she was defending him as much from herself as from Sadie.

"I 'spose so," Sadie admitted grudgingly. But she qualified her admission by adding: "Not that that's sayin' much! Here's Horace Worth," she said, peering out of the window Mary had abandoned at her entrance. Mary gave an exclamation which might have been one of annoyance. Certainly that is the interpretation Sadie chose to give it. "You can

hide if you want to. I don't mind lyin' to him,'' she finished reassuringly.

''I want to see him, Sadie,'' declared Mary.

''Well, there's no accountin' for tastes!'' She crossed over to the door and waited for the knock which came a second later. Opening it with a suddenness which distinctly embarrassed the man standing on the little porch, hat in hand, she said coolly:

''Come right in. Miss Mary's home.''

''Thank you. Good-evening, Mary.'' He did not offer to shake hands, as most people in Great Falls would have done.

''Good-evening, Horace. Doctor Simpson is here with mother. Won't you sit down?''

''I did not come to see your mother, Mary.'' He looked rather pointedly at Sadie.

''You needn't say it; I'm goin' as fast as I can!'' Sadie gave her head a characteristic toss, and made for the dining-room door. As she opened it, Doctor Simpson's voice came to them.

''There! That's about all for to-day.''

''She isn't doing at all well, Horace,'' said Mary in a troubled voice. ''Doctor Simpson says—that is he tells *me* that I can't go back to New York.''

''Did you *want* to go back?''

''I want to help her.''

''Give her the choice between death and

money earned in such a place as I found you in, and see what she'd say!"

"I have tried to explain all that to you, but it isn't any use."

"I've kept away from her, but I can't do it forever. She's bound to ask me where I found you, and how you were living."

"You don't know how I was living!"

"I have the evidence of my own eyes. Shall I tell her what I saw?"

"No!"

"Do you think that I will lie?"

"You must. She couldn't stand the truth—as you would tell it."

"What have you ever done for me, that I should make myself a liar for your sake?"

"It isn't for *my* sake; it's for hers."

"I won't do it. I refuse to 'do evil that good may come.'"

"You are quite sure that you can always tell good from evil?"

"Any child knows them apart."

"That's just the trouble; no one knows them apart! You've sat all your life behind the barred window of the cashier's cage in a country bank. Where and how did you learn about life as it is? From the money you count all day long? From the columns of figures you've added?"

"I suppose you think I would have learned

more about life from your Tenderloin friends," he sneered. "No, Mary, a man is known by his deeds."

"Let me tell you something, Horace. I hunted up some of those people you gave me letters to. They are good Christians, I believe. I put my pride in my pocket, and asked for help. I was very nearly starving!"

"Mary!" He was genuinely horrified, and a little incredulous.

"I was. But did they help me?"

"They didn't know."

"They should have. They *would* have, if they practised what they preached—the brotherhood of man. Hilda Newton, this woman you dare to judge, she knew! *She* read the misery in my face, and took me in, when your Christian friends closed their doors in my face!"

Worth's face flushed, and the hard, obstinate look which Mary knew so well replaced the softer one it had worn a moment before.

"And I say that it would have been better for you *to* starve!"

Mary gave a laugh of scornful amusement. "Did you ever *try starving?* Do you even know what it is to be really hungry? No! You get all your ideas where you get your experience—from some book!"

"You know as well as I do what that woman is!" he said, returning to safer ground. "Do

you think it is easy for me, loving you as I do, to forget the way I found you?"

"If you'd only believe me, Horace."

He paced the length of the room several times in silence.

"Mary, you've got to marry me. It's the only way. We won't think of it, we won't speak of it ever again!"

"If I am to marry you, Horace, we'll *have* to speak of it."

"I tell you I can't stand the thought of it. You! In that woman's house, with her vile friends around you!"

Mary had her moment of triumph. "But you know I had done no wrong; or you, with your pride, would never ask me to be your wife!"

Again he flushed deeply, and his eyes were lighted with a light she had never before seen in them. "Do you think I can forget how you looked as you stood there in your beauty, the soft lights on your white arms and neck! Are men who live only for vicious pleasures, like those men, the only ones—I tell you those men love a thousand women! For me it's only you —only you!"

"Horace!"

He caught her roughly by the arm. "There was one man there who tried to defend you. Who was he? What was he to you?"

"Nothing!" She freed herself from his grasp. "Almost a stranger."

"Why did he defend you, then?"

"He is a gentleman. A man of family and position. He was different from the others, that's all."

"He loves you!"

"No!"

"He defended you. He lied for you, for all I know, this gentleman! Would he do what I have done, offer you his name?"

"No. I am nothing to him. I had only seen him a few times in my life. I shall never see him again."

"Nor any others of his kind. You'll marry me. We'll forget those weeks. You'll learn to love me, if you don't yet."

"I am afraid, Horace."

"Of me?"

"And of myself. I am too weak, and you are too hard. I want to do my duty, but I want something else, as well. I want to live! I want happiness!"

"In sin?"

"No, no! For a moment, I confess, I stood at the very edge, but I drew back—or was drawn back—in time." She pointed to the dining-room door. "I think it was her voice," she said with deep feeling. "I shall never be afraid again."

"You can't trust yourself. It's your nature. Your heart, your mind, your body cry out for pleasure and gayety and happiness!" He caught her roughly in his arms. His voice was hoarse with passion. "You need a man's strength to fight for you against yourself. I won't let you go. I tell you, I'm going to hold you fast!"

The door opened, and Sadie stood looking at him with cold contempt. He snatched his arms from around Mary, and, grabbing his hat, went without a word.

"A little walk in the cool air will do him good," was Sadie's only comment.

"I made her promise to try to take a nap," said Doctor Simpson, following close on Sadie's heels. "I'll look in again before bedtime."

"She's no worse?" asked Mary anxiously.

"No, and no better. But we are going to pull her through. But we must be very careful of her, Mary."

"Yes, doctor." With a little nod, and a smile, he was gone.

"He thinks a *lot* of her," commented Sadie. But not wishing to appear to give any man too much credit, she added: "I suppose it's just a kind of conceit. He thinks he owns her now that he's about saved her life!"

"Sadie, Sadie!" said Mary, shaking her head.

Sadie was about to answer when her atten-

tion was attracted to something outside the window.

"My! There's the grandest automobile I ever saw in all my born days, and it's comin' right up to our gate!"

"People looking for the State road, I guess. Point it out to them, Sadie."

Sadie clasped her hands in a sort of ecstasy. Her face was flushed and her eyes were shining. Never in all her life had Mary seen her so moved.

"If I could have just *one* ride in a car like that, I'd die—I'd die laughing!"

With which astonishing speech—for Sadie never laughed—she opened the door and went out to the gate, as Mary started to see if her mother was keeping her promise to the doctor.

"Mary!"

At the sound of that voice, Mary dropped the door-knob as if it had burned her. She turned with a sort of fright to confront a little figure standing in the doorway, wearing a long automobile coat, her head wound in an enormous veil.

"Polly!"

"Wait!" said Polly. She turned her head and spoke to someone outside. "Come on in."

Then, as a tall figure stood in the doorway beside her, she went on teasingly:

"Be a sport, Hilda! Take it off. We know you."

Hilda's face was completely hidden in her veil. As she tore it off, Mary could see that she was in a sort of cold fury. She had never seen Hilda really angry before.

"Willy made me come! He fooled me! He told me we were to tour to Boston. But he framed this up, damn him. He's brought me here to my own town, where everybody knows me. He's had it in for me ever since you left. He's done this to get square!" Her voice broke in an angry sob.

"You flatter yourself, my dear," said Polly coolly. "He did it to make a hit with Bob Merrick."

"Mr. Merrick! He isn't with you!"

"You can bet he's here—with bells on!" said Polly, sinking into the nearest chair.

"What right had he to follow me here!" Two bright spots of color burned in Mary's face.

"Right?" asked Hilda bitterly. "He's a man, and you've a pretty face, Mary."

She crossed the room with her long, swift step, and took both of Mary's hands in hers. "Don't, don't come back! Promise me!" she begged.

"She won't, Hilda. She don't belong. She

fits this rube atmosphere like a fat chorus girl fits new silk tights," Polly reassured her.

Along the little path that led to the door came the sound of steps, and Willy, followed by Joe and Merrick, came up on the porch, Sadie, fairly bursting with a curiosity which she vainly endeavored to hide, bringing up the rear. At the sight of her, Hilda lowered her veil once more, and turned away from the light.

"The girl said to come right in," said Willy with an easy heartiness which he was far from feeling. "How are you, kid? Come on! You know you're glad to see us!"

Mary ignored his outstretched hand. "Why did you come here?"

"Oh, just touring round. Nice country!"

"What's nice about it?" demanded Joe. "Four tires in eighty miles!"

"And tires cost money," remarked Polly.

"Did I do wrong to come?" asked Merrick soberly.

"Yes."

Sadie, who had been making a pretense of fussing about the room, caught Mary's eye, and reluctantly withdrew.

"You didn't want to see me, then?" He was standing beside her chair. His face was very grave.

"No." Mary returned his steady glance, her

lips firmly set. She intended to leave him in no doubt of her sincerity.

"I told you she wouldn't want us here, Willy," said Hilda in a low, angry tone. "Take me away before I meet anyone who knows me. I'll stand for a lot, but if you shame me—well, I'll find some way to get you!"

"Ah, what do you care for a bunch of rubes!" growled Willy. He did not care to meet her furious eyes. He was just a little afraid of Hilda when her temper was up.

"I——" Hilda began, and stopped with a sort of gasp. For Mrs. Horton was standing on the threshold of the dining-room. She looked very ill and very tired. But her little white face was lighted with hospitable and welcoming smiles. She came forward with easy dignity.

"I heard voices, Mary," she said, "and Sadie tells me that some friends of yours have called."

"Yes, mother." She went over and gently took her mother's arm and led her to the big arm-chair. Just what she was going to do she could not tell. But it would be impossible to get her out of the room now that she was here. Surely, even Willy would see how ill she was, and would make some excuse to get away. For

the moment, she had forgotten that her mother knew Hilda.

"I am so glad to meet any friends of my daughter's," Mrs. Horton went on gently. She was seated in her chair now.

Prompted by some impulse which Mary could not fathom, Hilda suddenly raised her veil. The smile on her mother's face was blown out, as a gust of wind might blow out the flame of a candle.

"Hilda Newton!"

"Mother!" Mary laid a restraining hand on her mother's shoulder.

"I didn't ever expect to see you back here in Great Falls, Hilda," said Mrs. Horton coldly.

And now it was the turn of Polly, the ever-ready. Never had Mary blessed her in her heart as she did now! She crossed over to the big chair, with her gayest, happiest little laugh.

"We knew how surprised you'd all be! We've been touring from Boston, and Hilda just *couldn't* resist the temptation to stop at her old home! She *did* so want her old friends to meet her husband!"

Her smile had an oriental blandness, but behind Mrs. Horton's back she made a face at Willy, who for the moment appeared to be threatened with some sort of stroke. For-

tunately, Mrs. Horton had only eyes for Hilda.

"Hilda, dear! I'm so glad!" Relief and pleasure were in her tone.

"Her husband, Mr. Morgan, Mrs. Horton," continued this self-appointed mistress-of-ceremonies, totally unabashed by the murderous glare of Willy's large, light eyes, "and Mr. Garfield." She took Joe's arm, with an unmistakable air of possession.

Joe gave Mrs. Horton an awkward bow. Willy made an inarticulate noise in his throat. For the moment it was all he could achieve!

"I'm glad to know you, gentlemen." Mrs. Horton beamed on them in turn. "And"—turning to Polly—"of course you are Mrs. Garfield."

"Oh, yes."

Joe gave a muttered exclamation, which was rapidly followed by a second, as Polly pinched his arm.

"Yes, dear?" she inquired politely. Joe freed himself from her clutch, and stalked over to the window, regarding the prospect outside with an absorbed interest.

"We met your daughter in New York," said Polly, addressing herself to Mrs. Horton. "Hilda brought her to see us."

"Mary didn't tell me much——" began Mrs. Horton.

"Naturally. She was looking for a situation

at the time, and she saw so many people. This is Mr. Robert Merrick, Mrs. Horton."

"I am afraid we are intruding," said Merrick pleasantly, holding out his hand. "We are to go as far as Concord to-night. I think we had better be getting along, don't you, Morgan?"

"Oh, no!" Mrs. Horton assured him. "The road's good, and the moon will be up by nine o'clock. Hilda hasn't been home for more than six years. I want you to tell me all about yourself, Hilda, dear!" She patted Hilda's arm. "You don't know how glad I am to see you all. Mary, you must make them stay to supper. It's Sunday night, and you won't get much. But a person does get real hungry riding in the open air!"

"Sadie! Sadie!" she called.

"Yes, ma'am," said Sadie, appearing in the doorway. "What do——" At the sight of Hilda, her voice trailed off into silence.

"It's Hilda, Sadie. And she's married to this gentleman."

Sadie followed the motion of her hand. Willy had fallen asleep in his chair.

Sadie looked him over with candid disapproval. "I heard she'd had trouble!" she remarked grimly.

"Willy! Willy!" Hilda went over and shook him by the shoulder.

"Eh? Oh! Beg pardon," said Willy, pulling himself together, and rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand.

"They're going to stay to supper, Sadie. Put on five more plates."

"What will I put in 'em?" asked Sadie, with grim humor.

"I'll get supper myself."

"Mother!" remonstrated Mary.

"Now don't be silly, Mary. These girls will help, I know. Come along, Hilda. We can have a good talk. Come, Mrs. Garfield. Mrs. Garfield!" Polly gave a guilty start. "We'll be ready in about twenty minutes."

She hooked her arm in Hilda's, and started for the kitchen. Polly was about to follow, when she found her way blocked by both Willy and Joe. She smiled up impudently into their scowling faces.

"You've got a nerve!" stormed Joe.

"My wife!" Willy rolled his eyes to Heaven.

"Well? Why not?"

"You know the mess this may get me into, don't you?" demanded Willy.

"It was coming to you. You played a dirty trick on Hilda. And, let me tell you, Willy, if you know what's good for you, you'll go through with the bluff. Hilda is dangerous to-night, Willy, dear. And excitement isn't good for fat men!"

"And suppose the papers——"

"You should have thought of that before."

"Well, I suppose I've got to take a chance. But if my wife hears of it, there will be a devil of a row!"

"Row! If mine gets wise, I'll have a fine bunch of alimony to pay! I'm going out to change that rear tire. A man's a plumb fool to use a new tire on roads like this!" growled Joe, and went out to the machine.

Willy sank back in his chair with a sigh. "I'm dying for a drink!" he said.

"I don't suppose you can get one in this village," said Merrick.

"There must be some human beings live here," protested Willy.

At that moment Sadie came into the dining-room to reset the table. Hope revived in Willy's breast.

"Young woman, is it possible to get any liquor in this town?"

"Why not?" asked Sadie, without looking up. Young woman, indeed!

"On Sunday, Sadie?" asked Mary.

"If a person don't mind payin' Sunday prices."

"Put me wise, won't you?" pleaded Willy.

"Straight down two streets, then turn to yer left. Go along till you see a sign: 'Crosby, Blacksmith and Pianos Tuned.'"

"Not the same man!"

"Brothers. Go right up to Amos and say: 'Fifty cents' worth of gasoline.' Say it like this"—Here Sadie permitted herself to wink slowly—"'Fifty cents' worth of gasoline,'" she repeated, suiting the action to the word.

"I bet I get gasoline, if I do!" said Willy petulantly.

"Not if you make sure it's Amos. He's the musical one. But Abner, the blacksmith, is a church member."

"And how will I know them apart?"

"One of 'em's cross-eyed."

"Which one, in Heaven's name!"

Sadie looked at him reprovingly. "There aint no call to get profane about it," she remarked. "If you see the one that *ain't,* I wouldn't let on what I was after."

Willy cheered up. Smiling broadly, he went over to Sadie and held out a dollar.

"Thanks! Here!"

Sadie drew herself up stiffly. "I beg *your* pardon. *My* folks don't take charity!" And she flounced out of the room, leaving the astonished Willy gaping after her.

"Gee! Ain't this a long ways from Broadway!" was his only comment, as he made for the door, bound, presumedly, to try his fortune at the blacksmith-piano-tuning establishment.

CHAPTER IX

Mary saw his heavy figure go out the gate with a little panic of fear. For the second time in their lives, she and Robert Merrick were alone together. Her first impulse was to join the others in the kitchen. She took a step towards the door, and then turned around and faced him. It was perfectly evident that he had something to say in his own defense, and she also wished to make her own attitude perfectly clear. When would she ever find a better opportunity? The chances were that their paths would never cross again after to-day. Certainly they would not, if she had anything to say about it.

He saw that she was waiting for him to speak, and came forward from his place at the window. His manner was, as always, the perfection of courtesy, but he spoke with an added gravity and seriousness.

"I shouldn't have come, Miss Mary. I see that now. In excuse I can only say that Hilda told me that you had written saying that your mother was better. I didn't, I need hardly add, realize that the very sight of me would be so distasteful to you!"

There was a tinge of bitterness in his tone,

and his lips tightened a little. But there was an eager hope in his eyes that she would deny, or at least qualify, his last statement.

In that he was doomed to disappointment. "You *more* than any of them," she said.

"But why?"

"You don't belong to their world any more than I do. You have no more right to be living among them than I had."

"How else should I live?"

"Like a man. Doing a man's work."

"I've done a man's work all my life," he protested. "Now I want my share of the fun. What else is there worth living for?"

Mary gave a little disdainful smile. "Because one woman hurt you, does that give you the right to live as you are living? Because she wasn't worth your love, you say that no love is real. When I first met you there in New York, Mr. Merrick, I trusted you, for I saw that you were different from the others. Can you imagine me trusting Joe Garfield or Willy Morgan in the same way, ignorant as I was? Would you have had me do so?"

"God forbid!"

"Very well. Then can't you see how much worse it is for you to be living as they do?"

"At least, I wrong no one but myself."

"How can you be sure of that? Let me tell you something. That night, I would never have

agreed to go out with the others, if you had not been there."

"Mary!" He took an impulsive step towards her, his hands outstretched.

"No. Don't misunderstand me. You had been kind to me. You were gentle. You didn't frighten me as *they* did. And so I was going. Oh, I don't deny that! I was going with you because there was kindness in your face. I was a weak fool! But what were you?"

"Is that quite fair?"

"Yes, I think so. If I had gone, what then? What would I be now? Could I have come back and looked my mother in the face? Or would I not have had to come as Hilda has done, muffled in a veil? Can you tell me honestly that I could have trusted you to save me from myself?"

"No!" he said, and his face flushed.

"At least you are not a liar. And now another thing: do you dare tell me the truth as to why you are here now?"

"To see you!" he cried passionately. "Because I have thought of you every day—hundreds of times!"

"And because Willy told you that if you came and tried your best, I'd go back with you. Come! You are no liar. Didn't he tell you that?"

"Yes."

She turned away from him and went over to

the old-fashioned chimney-piece, and hid her face in her hands.

Polly, coming in so quietly that neither of them stirred, regarded their respective backs—for Merrick had again taken his post by the window, and was looking out on the silent village street without seeing it—with a knowing eye.

"I just knew you two would be having a lovely time!" There was no irony in her voice. They could not see her smile. "Where's Joe?"

"Putting a tire on the car," Merrick answered her.

"Poor dear! You know he ain't strong! Run out and help him, Mr. Merrick."

"What for?"

"I know it ain't polite to hint, but there's a lovely sunset."

Merrick shrugged himself out of the door without a look in Mary's direction.

"Well, Mary."

"Yes?" said Mary, turning round, not caring that her eyes were red.

"Does he win?"

"Win?"

"Is it Central Park, West, and a new limousine, or the straight and narrow?"

"I'm going to stay here, Polly."

"Ah," said Polly with great satisfaction. "I had you right. Your mother's a dear old party,

Mary. She's so tickled 'cause she thinks that Hilda's straight, that she's in there spilling all she knows. She wised me to what you're up against. You can't run a car without gas, kid."

From the little bag on her wrist she took an astonishingly large roll of money. From where she stood Mary could see that they were all of large denomination.

"Quick!" she said, holding it out. "Go South with that before the bunch butts in."

"Money? For me?" cried Mary in genuine astonishment.

"Regular coin."

"But I can't take your money, Polly, dear!"

"Why not? I took it! It's easy money, kid. Fool's coin! Give it a chance to do some work on the level."

"No, I can't take it. I've got to fight this out for myself. But"—she crossed over to Polly and kissed her warmly—"it was sweet of you, dear, all the same."

"I wish you'd take it," said Polly sincerely. "Honest, I won't miss it." The familiar impish smile lighted up her impudent little face. "I've thought of a new one to spring on Joe!"

"Really, I can't."

"All right!" said Polly, with a little sigh. "Any time you want it, just holler."

"I thought that you—that you were very careful of your money, Polly."

"In polite language that I was a 'tightwad.' That's my reputation all right. Gee, Mary! Ain't it great here? Just listen to the quiet! Did I ever tell you the ambition of my life, Mary?"

"No, dear."

Polly settled herself comfortably in Mrs. Horton's big chair, motioning Mary to sit on the stool at her feet.

"It's the same as Willy Morgan's," she announced. "Chickens!"

"What!"

"The same." She confirmed it with a wag of her head. "Only mine will be real ones. White chickens."

"Why that ambition?" laughed Mary.

"Why any ambition? Mine isn't the battiest dream on earth, at that. Just a little cottage, with green grass and red roses and the white hens. Do you see the picture?"

"And, of course, the right man."

"N-i-x-i-e! I'm talking about *real* happiness. Just me and the other old hens!"

"But all alone?"

"Sure! I've had a crack at most everything. But I was never alone in all my life. I was born in a tenement house, and brought up in an orphan asylum. I used to sleep six in a bed, with

"Did I ever tell you the ambition of my life, Mary?"

five other little bunches of misery. I worked two years in a shoe factory in Lynn, Mass.; three hundred girls to a room. After that, I beat it to New York, and joined the push. I was never once in my life far enough away so's I couldn't raise a million people if I hollered 'Fire!' Alone! Gee! The only man in the world I ever wanted to marry was Robinson Crusoe!"

"But, why the white hens, Polly?"

"Back there, at the orphan asylum, there was a little cottage like the one I'm going to have. I could see it through a knothole in the fence. *It* had green grass, red roses, and white hens. I used to believe in Heaven when I was an ignorant little kid—till the kind lady that ran that old joint beat it out of me!"

"Poor little Polly!" said Mary, patting her hand.

"And I thought that was it," Polly went on. "Right the other side of that fence. It looked awful good to me! Does yet. Of course I know it ain't Heaven now, or I wouldn't try to butt in. But, believe *me,* I'm still strong for the cottage thing, and the green grass, and the red roses, and the white hens. And, what's more, I mean to have them all!"

"When?"

"Soon. I know just how much money I need, and I'm getting it. Some day I'm going to

settle down and not do a damned thing but chuck corn to those hens, while I laugh at the boobs that have paid for it all!"

"I suppose you have reason enough for your bitterness against men!"

"I'm not bitter. Of course, I'm a sensible woman, and I know that all men are crooks at heart. But I don't kid myself that any man ever wronged me, because I'm wise that I was wrong from the jump. I wasn't fourteen when I made up my mind to two things: to get that cottage, and to play every man in the world for a good thing till I *did* get it. When I do, I'm going to sit behind a fence for the rest of my life, and laugh at 'em through a knothole!"

She smiled down at Mary with that little, mocking smile which was so pathetic. The dining-room door opened and Mrs. Horton, followed by Hilda, came in.

"Supper will be ready just as soon as the biscuits are done. Hilda's real handy about a kitchen, Mary. Mr. Morgan's a lucky man!"

"He's all of that," agreed Polly. "He——" The sound of a bell floated in at the window. "Hello!" said Polly, springing excitedly to her feet. "Where's the fire?"

"It's for prayer-meeting," said Mrs. Horton, repressing a smile. She accepted the chair which Polly moved up for her. "Doctor Simpson won't let me go," she went on regretfully.

"He's a fine doctor, but he's terribly set in his ways. Remember how obstinate he was as a boy, Hilda?"

"I—I remember very well," said Hilda. Her voice was barely audible.

"I always did say that if he hadn't gone off to college when he did, that you and he—But there! I mustn't talk like that. I was forgetting Mr. Morgan! Here he comes now. Oh, no. It's Mr. Garfield and Mr. Merrick."

"I washed my hands at the pump in the yard!" said Joe, with real excitement. "First time I ever did such a thing in my life! Took a drink of the water, too. It wasn't so bad! Do you know I rather like the country. I'd like to find a good place 'round here to send my little girl."

"Your little girl? You have a little girl, then," Mrs. Horton beamed with pleasure.

"Sure," said Joe proudly. "She's ten years old!"

"Ten years old!" Mrs. Horton turned to Polly. "And you so young appearing! Why, you can't be much more than—— And the mother of a ten-year-old girl!"

"Just ten to-morrow," said Polly smoothly. She gave Joe a malicious glance, as she held out her hand. "Joe, dear, don't forget that you promised me fifty dollars for her birthday present."

"Eh?"

"What a memory he has! Come over, Joe!"

"I'll give you a check to-morrow," stammered Joe.

"No, no! You'll be sure to forget it. I'll take it now, Joe."

"No, you won't!"

"I really think you'd better, dear, or I'm afraid we won't have a happy day at all." She winked slowly at Mary behind Mrs. Horton's back.

"Here!" said Joe sullenly, dragging some bills from his pocket.

"Be sure you buy something sensible," warned Mrs. Horton.

"Sensible's my middle name," Polly reassured her.

The church bell stopped with a final warning tap. Mrs. Horton's face clouded for a moment.

"They're beginning service now," she said regretfully. "It's the first time I ever missed it except when I was sick in bed. We can't even have hymns. The doctor made me promise not to touch that organ, and Mary would never learn to play it." Suddenly her face lightened up. She turned eagerly to Hilda, who was lost in a gloomy revery. "Hilda, dear! You used to play. Won't you play us something?"

"I!"

"Any church music. It don't matter what. And," she added with her gay little laugh, "it don't matter if you don't play it very well." Her face sobered again. She linked her arm through Hilda's, and went on in a lower tone that Hilda alone could catch: "It's the spirit of it, dear. It seems like we ought to give thanks. For everything; for the way you've come back, for my recovery, for, oh, so many things! You'll do it, dear, won't you?"

"I can't, I can't!" said poor Hilda wildly. She gently disengaged herself from the older woman's restraining arm, and went over to the window.

"Can't what?" asked Mrs. Horton, bewildered by her vehemence.

"She's given up playing for ever so long," chimed in Polly. "But that needn't trouble us. I'll play it."

"You!" exclaimed Joe.

"Sure! I learned to play in the Or—— in the Young Ladies' Seminary where I was educated."

She went over, and having turned the stool as high as it would go, seated herself. "What shall I play?"

"There's a hymn-book there, on the top. Any of them."

"I forgot to say that I play only by ear. I can't read a note. How will this do?"

She began the opening bars of an old Gospel hymn, "Christ Receiveth Sinful Men."

"Hello!" said a genial voice from the doorway, "Going to dance?"

It was Willy, radiant over the success of his quest. Evidently he had carried out Sadie's instructions to the letter. Under his arm, wrapped in a dirty newspaper, was a quart bottle. His thoroughly contented air suggested that he had sampled its contents on the way back. Joe licked his lips enviously.

"Why, it's Sunday!" laughed Mrs. Horton.

"He's got no memory at all. He's even worse than Mr. Garfield," volunteered the organist.

"Sit down. We're going to have some hymns," explained Mrs. Horton. "I'll take that for you, Mr. Morgan." She reached out her hand for the bottle.

But Willy was coy. "Gasoline," he said briefly.

"Gasoline?"

"For the car."

"Is this all right?" asked Polly hastily.

"Splendid! Come, Sadie! Hymns!" called Mrs. Horton. "We've plenty of books. Mary, give Mr. Merrick a book. No. 211. All ready, Mrs. Garfield."

"All right."

But Mrs. Horton held up her hand. A little

flush of embarrassment masked the customary pallor of her face.

"I never could pray before folks for some reason or other. But I know He understands! Hilda, dear, my heart's glad for you to-night, and for my own many blessings. My life spared, and my girl safe in her own home. God make us all worthy of His goodness! Now!"

She, herself, took the lead. Her thin, quavering old voice, which still retained all of its early sweetness, went valiantly through the first few lines before anyone else joined in.

> "Sinners, Jesus will receive,
> Sound His word of grace to all,"—

Mary and Merrick were sharing a book. At the next line, they, with Sadie, who sang in a hard, metallic voice as if she really enjoyed it, joined in. Merrick had a fine baritone voice, which suggested a certain amount of cultivation. He sang with an entire lack of self-consciousness which surprised Mary, although she could not have well said why. Joe and Willy were ludicrously ill at ease. They exchanged sheepish glances, and, as far as possible, hid their interesting countenances behind their books. Polly, at the organ, added her throaty contralto. Unseen by anyone except Mary, Hilda stole softly into the dining-room, and abandoned herself to an hysterical burst of tears. Shame at having been led into playing

upon the credulity of this simple-hearted old lady was not the least of her emotions!

"Who the heavenly pathway leave,
All who linger, all who fall.

Sing it o'er and o'er again,
Christ receiveth sinful men,
Sing it o'er and o'er again,
Christ receiveth sinful men!

Come and He will give you rest,
Trust Him, for His word is plain.
He will take the sinfulest,
Christ receiveth sinful men!

Sing it o'er and o'er again,
Christ receiveth sinful men,
Sing it o'er and o'er again,
Christ receiveth sinful men!"

CHAPTER X

They had all gone into supper at the conclusion of the hymn in a rather subdued state of mind. But, as always, it was Polly who came gallantly to the rescue. Hilda had so far regained control over herself that only Mary and Polly suspected that she had been weeping. She made a brave pretense of eating, while Polly kept them all in a gale of laughter with an account of her interview with a farmer's wife who had tried to play upon her supposed ignorance of all things rural when she had talked to her about chickens and eggs. Only the two girls understood the true inwardness of the conversation.

Willy, alone, did not share the general amusement. For, astonishing to relate, Willy, whose contempt for any cooking not directed by a duly accredited chef, was proverbial among his acquaintances, devoted himself heart and soul to the good things which his hostess had provided. And this, too, without the inevitable cocktail which he usually considered indispensable. Even Hilda roused herself sufficiently to wonder at him.

A sudden longing came over her to slip away for a few moments by herself. To get away

from everyone, to go out of the house and take a final look at the old street, which had once seemed to her almost imposing. In the darkness no one would be likely to recognize her. Then, too, everybody was sure to be at church. Having made a little sign to Mary, she rose from her chair, speaking in a low tone to Mrs. Horton.

"I'm sure you won't mind, if I go out into your garden for a little. Really, I am not hungry."

"Not at all," Mrs. Horton assured her. "You might shut the door after you. I feel the draught a little."

"Yes, I will."

She came into the sitting-room, closing the dining-room door carefully behind her. On a chair in the corner were her coat and veil. She picked up the veil and wound it loosely about her head. If by chance she should meet anyone, if by chance she should meet *him,* it would be a simple matter to hide her face. She would take a last look at the old village so fraught with happy, innocent memories. She had a double reason now for resolving never to see it again. How could she ever hope to return, having so tricked Mrs. Horton. And yet Polly had done it for the best. Her quick wit had seized upon the only course that was open to them all.

Her fingers had just touched the knob of the door, when it turned sharply from the outside,

and *he* stood on the threshold. Their eyes met in mutual recognition. Neither spoke. Beyond a slight catching of his breath, there was no sound. Hilda felt chained to the spot where she stood. She would have given her life for the strength to run away.

The door of the dining-room opened and closed softly. From a long way off came Mrs. Horton's voice. There was just the suggestion of anxiety in her tone.

"You are all right, dear?" And then, peering a moment in the dim light of the room at the figure standing stonily at the door, "Oh, it's *you,* doctor. I didn't recognize you at first."

"I—I wanted to see you again before bedtime," he managed to say.

"You make a regular baby of me!" She shook her head at him disapprovingly. This is Hilda, doctor. Surely you haven't forgotten Hilda Newton!"

"No." But his steady gaze wasn't for Hilda.

"Of course not. I wonder how many times I've sat at that very window over there, and seen you two coming home from High School together! Have you told him, Hilda?"

"No," said Hilda faintly.

"He'll be glad. Doctor Simpson, Hilda's married. She married real well, a Mr. Morgan. He's here with her. He's at supper with some

more of Mary's friends. Tell him all about it, dear. I must go back. I fancied you weren't feeling quite happy to-night. But I guess it was only my fancy."

With a last kindly smile at them, over her shoulder, she returned to the dining-room.

"Married! Thank God!" he said fervently.

"It's a lie, Ned, all a lie. I'm not married."

"But she—then what——"

"She doesn't know. Mr. Morgan *is* here. But he isn't my husband. We lied to her, that's all."

She waited for him to upbraid her, to denounce her. But he said nothing. His hands —such strong, capable, useful hands, how well she remembered them!—clenched at his sides. He turned slowly as if to go.

"Why don't you say something? Why don't you tell me how much you despise me?"

He made a protesting gesture. "Because I love you, Hilda."

She shrank away as if he had struck her. Her hand, which should have borne a ring, flew to her throat.

"No, no! Don't, Ned! Don't say that! Call me anything you like. I deserve it, I know. But don't tell me that you love me. That I cannot bear!"

"Always," he said simply.

"No, no! Once I thought you did care. But

you went away. I waited, but it was so long!"

"What else was I to do?" he asked. "I had no money. But all the time I was away I was working for you. And then, one day, they told me that you had gone—and *how* you had gone." For a moment he seemed unable to go on. When he spoke again, his voice was less strained. "About three years ago, my uncle died and left me everything. I have plenty of money now, now when it is too late. That was why you wouldn't wait for me, I suppose, because I was poor."

"What is the use of my denying it?" asked Hilda wearily. "But it wasn't that. I wasn't afraid of being poor. I'd never been anything else. But I was so alone. And I thought that you—that you had forgotten."

"Forgotten! I?"

"There must have been something wrong with me, there must have been. There wasn't any excuse at all. I was just wrong, all wrong. I'm not worth a thought of yours!"

"You were very young," he reminded her gently. "Life's a hard thing!"

"At least, I didn't really hurt you. I'm glad of that—thankful! If I'd have stayed here, I might have ruined your life. But I haven't done that," she insisted. "I haven't done that," she repeated, as if, failing any reply

from him, she was desperately trying to convince herself that her words were true. Still, he had no answer for her. "Ned, Ned! Tell me that I haven't hurt you!"

"We can't go through life without being hurt many times, Hilda," he said gently. "The main thing is to try to rise above the hurts, I suppose." He drew a long breath, and squared his shoulders. "I think, with God's help, I have won my fight."

She looked at him with a sort of reverence. Love and longing glorified her face.

"You—you haven't married, I know that," she went on gently. "That isn't my fault? Tell me."

At last he turned and looked at her. "There never has been anyone but you, Hilda. There never *can* be."

"Oh, I didn't know, I didn't know!" she said in real distress.

"If you had died, I could have borne it, as other men do. If you had married some other *man,* I could have learned to be glad of your happiness. Neither death nor marriage could have separated us, as *you,* yourself, have separated us."

"Ned! Don't!"

"I'm sorry if I hurt you, but I must. For I want you to know—I always have—that when that day comes which I have waited for

so long, that day which I know is coming some time, when you turn in horror from the life you are living, I want you to come back to me."

She trembled so that she had to lean on the back of the chair for support.

"You mean that you love me enough to take me back? In spite of everything?"

"No," he said, with a sad little shake of the head, "not that. Love doesn't mean just what it meant to me six years ago. All that is dead, quite dead. Nothing can make things as they were before. But it is equally true that nothing can alter the fact that you are the woman I love. And, when you are ready, when you are tired of the luxury and excitement and gayety, when you need help, comfort, and a home, you can come to me, just as you would come to your brother, if you had one. I'll care for you just as I would care for a sister, for a little child."

She sank into a chair, and buried her face in her hands. Mary, coming softly into the room, surprised him standing, looking down at her with an expression of ineffable tenderness.

"Why, doctor, I didn't know you were here!"

"I wanted to see your mother, Mary. I'll come later, when she's alone."

At the sound of the closing door, Hilda looked up. The dumb misery in her eyes went

to Mary's heart. Tears had not come to relieve her yet.

"If only I hadn't come here! I didn't know! How can I go on living? How can I bear it? I've hurt him! Hurt his whole life!"

"Hush, dear!" said Mary soothingly. "It must be hard, I know, for you to have to lie to him."

"I didn't. I couldn't lie to him."

"You told him the truth?"

"Yes."

"Hilda, dear! He wasn't cruel to you? In some ways, I fear he *is* hard."

"It would have been easier if he had been," said Hilda. "I had forgotten that there were men like that. I have lied to myself for years. I have told myself that I was really no worse than lots of other people; that all the world was rotten. But it isn't. In my heart, I knew it wasn't. The world is good! Life should be sweet and clean. I'm the rotten thing. The world's all right. It's I that am wrong."

The sound of a pushing back of chairs came from the dining-room, and Willy's coarse laugh came in to them. With a shudder of disgust, Hilda went over and affected to examine an ivy which grew outside one of the windows. The dining-room door opened, and Mrs. Horton came in, leading the others.

"I tell you, Mrs. Horton, there'd be good

money in suppers like that at the corner of Forty-second Street and Broadway!" said Willy enthusiastically.

"Fresh eggs and country-cured ham! Hot biscuits and home-made jam! Well, I should say so!"

"It's a real pleasure to see a person enjoy their food like you do," said Mrs. Horton, pleased and flattered.

"He *is* real cute at the table," commented Polly. "Lots of folks have noticed that!"

"You can't kid me, Polly!" retorted Willy. For the moment he was too contented with life in general to be other than perfectly good-natured. He selected a big cigar from his pocket, and bit off the end thoughtfully. "When I see a good thing, I know enough to grab it," he finished with a laugh.

"I'd kinder noticed that, too. But, if I were you, I wouldn't light that cigar in here."

"Why not? Oh! Do you object, ma'am?" He looked at Mrs. Horton.

"Why, I——" she began doubtfully.

"Don't let him," urged Polly. "You'd smell it for a month, Mrs. Horton. And every time one of the neighbors dropped in, it would start a new scandal. They'd say that Mary had taken up smoking in New York."

"What an idea!" laughed the old lady. "Really, you know. I—I don't think I mind."

"Willy, I think Polly is right," said Hilda, laying her hand on his arm. "Why don't we sit outside, while you men smoke? We must start soon, you know."

"Yes," agreed Joe. "It's about two hours' run to Concord. We must get going by nine o'clock."

"Sadie, bring some chairs. They're going to sit out on the porch," called Mary.

"All right!" came Sadie's shrill voice from the kitchen.

It was very evident that Mrs. Horton's mind was greatly relieved to find that the smoking was to be done outside. "You're sure Mr. Morgan won't think I'm rude and inhospitable?" she whispered to Polly.

"Good gracious, no!" Polly assured her. "Willy's awful strong for the moon. He's the most romantic thing, although you wouldn't suspect it!"

"Yes?" questioned Mrs. Horton, a little doubtfully. Somehow it was difficult even for her to visualize Willy as a romantic figure.

"Joe!" Polly admonished him with a dig in the ribs. "Help the girl, can't you?"

Sadie was dragging two chairs from the dining-room, with an air of being greatly put upon. The truth was that she was consumed with curiosity about these friends that Mary had made in the city, and particularly about

Hilda and her husband. She had planned to dawdle as long as possible over the clearing of the dining-room, in the hope that she might catch stray bits of the conversation. And now they were all going outside! It was enough to put anyone in a temper!

"Sure!" said Joe, relieving Sadie of one of her chairs.

"Aren't you going to let me speak to you for a moment, Mary?" asked Bob Merrick, under cover of the general movement.

"Why—I——"

"Please!"

"I think not," said Mary, after a moment's consideration. "Coming, mother?" she asked, turning away from him.

"I think it's a little mite chilly for me," said her mother wistfully.

"We won't be long. Come on, Mary," said Polly, holding out her hand.

All went out on the little porch, except Merrick, who was feeling too dejected at his rebuff to have any inclination for general conversation.

"Don't *you* smoke?" asked Mrs. Horton.

His face lighted with one of his rare smiles. "If you don't mind, I think I'd rather stay in here and talk with you."

"Mind!" she laughed. "I love to talk. But sit down." She seated herself in one of the

straight-backed chairs at the table and waved her hand towards the big arm-chair in which she had been seated before supper. "Take the easy-chair. Most folks like it. I don't mind telling you I don't. But since I've been ill, Mary insists on my using it. They all treat me as if I were a baby! You see, when I was young, they weren't considered proper. And I never *have* got used to them."

"Thank you," said Merrick. He took the big chair to please her.

On the return from her last trip with the chairs, Sadie, who had been still further ruffled by the fact that Willy had declined to assist her, although she had held a chair out to him, was able to relieve her mind to a certain extent.

"It's a good thing they wouldn't let 'em smoke in here! I tell you, Mrs. Horton, I was scared for a minute! We'd have smelled it for weeks."

"I don't know as there's any real harm in tobacco smoke, Sadie."

"Nasty stuff! Always makes me think of men!" replied Sadie with a sidelong look at Merrick, which had the effect of making that unrepentant representative of the despised sex smile broadly.

"Sadie's incorrigible. I do believe she gets worse and worse every year," commented Mrs.

Horton. But she was obliged to join in Merrick's laugh.

"It has been a very long time since I was in a place like this," he said pleasantly, when he had recovered from Sadie's onslaught.

"It's a shabby little place," said his hostess deprecatingly.

"It's a home."

"Yes, it's that. It hasn't been easy to keep it. But everybody needs a home, and I had Mary to bring up."

"I used to live like this, a long time ago. I have been thinking of that time a lot, since I came here. There was a little old lady in that home, too. You remind me a good deal of her."

"Your mother?"

"Yes."

"We're a lot alike, I guess, we mothers."

"Yes, you're a lot alike; good and wise."

"And yet"—she gave a little reminiscent laugh—"my daughter thinks my worldly knowledge is not very great; or, at least, she thinks that the whole world has changed so fast that I haven't been able to keep up with it! I know more about what's going on in the world than she gives me credit for, and I know some things that she doesn't. It's just what's always been going on. Folks are good, or bad, or a little of both, just like they always were.

There are bad folks right here in this little town, just like there are in New York. If you switched them round, it wouldn't change them any. There's lots of good in this old world yet, if folks would only look for it. There was never a time that pigs couldn't find plenty of nasty things to eat, if they kept going round with their noses in the dirt!"

"Y-e-s. Only, just now, it seems to be the fashion to go round with your nose in the dirt!"

"It's all a matter of taste. If I was you, I'd rather keep my face clean."

"I had very nearly made up my mind that it didn't pay. I have been working very hard up to a few months ago. I sacrificed every pleasure in life, for a good many years, for money. And I got what I wanted."

Mrs. Horton gave him a shrewd look. "Then, of course, you're satisfied," she remarked dryly.

"I had nobody to share my money with. There was no need of grubbing all the rest of my life for more. So I decided I'd go in for pleasure."

"And you started out to hunt for it."

"To buy it," he said, his face hardening.

"Yes, I know. Lots of folks do that. You found plenty of it for sale, of course."

"No, I didn't."

Mrs. Horton laughed again, her wise little laugh of toleration. "The trouble with you, young man, is that, if you found what you were looking for, you wouldn't know it! Wait a minute." She went over to a little stand in the corner, and came back to him with an old-fashioned photograph album, turning the leaves as she came. "Let me show you something. There!" She pointed to a faded, old picture. Merrick got up and bent over the table to look at it.

"That's my father. He went out to California. He was a forty-niner. He did a good deal the same thing you say you're doing, and it killed him."

"He died out there?"

"Of a broken heart. He started in to hunt for a good thing. One day he thought he'd located a gold mine. He sent back here, and sold everything he owned, and started to work it. He was mighty sure he was right, a lot surer than you are. He worked, and worked, and worked until it was too late to come back. He just poured his life away into that hole in the ground. It was a long time before he'd believe that the shiny, yellow stuff he had found wasn't what he wanted. It was iron pyrites; what they call 'Fool's Gold.'"

"I see."

"He had a good farm here. He might have

stayed at home and worked that." She gave him one of her quick, bird-like looks. Her smile was genially humorous. "You see the moral I am trying to draw from my poor father's life? I guess you'd find a lot of pleasure in the world, if you didn't run round quite so hard looking for it."

For answer, he held out his hand. She took it in both of her own and gave it a motherly pat.

"I warned you I just *loved* to talk," she laughed. "It's your own fault for encouraging me!"

She rose from her chair, and going over to the window, called: "Mary! Oh, Mary!"

"Yes, mother?" came Mary's voice from outside. A second later, her charming head appeared at the window.

"I wish you'd put this shawl on," said her mother, holding out a shawl she had picked up from a chair. "It's getting chilly. And take Mr. Merrick out with the others. I want to see how Sadie's getting on, washing the best china. Sadie's a real good girl," she explained to Merrick, "but, somehow, she's apt to be in a bad temper Sundays!" And she hurried away to stand guard over her treasures.

"Will you come out?" asked Mary. There

"Let me show you something. There!" She pointed to a faded old picture.

was an unflattering lack of interest in her tone.

Merrick reached the window in a few quick strides. Her hands were resting on the sill. He grasped them quickly in his own, before she had time to forestall him by taking them away.

"Mary! What you said was true. I *did* come here hoping to take you away with me. I came into this house as a thief comes. I don't wonder at your contempt, now that I see things in their true light!"

"It doesn't matter," said Mary coldly. She wrenched her hands away as the door opened to admit the rest of the party.

"I couldn't stand for any more smoke, as I was simply dead for a cigarette myself. Only, I was afraid if I had one, the fire engines would come clanging down the street!" explained Polly.

"Enough's a plenty!"—Willy heaved an enormous sigh. "Let's beat it back to New York. How these natives live way off here gets me! How long *is* a day in this old burg, Mary?"

"Long enough to get wise to yourself sometimes, Willy," admonished Polly. "But you're right about one thing. We'd better be on our way."

"You would come. It's your own fault

if you don't like it!'' commented Hilda tartly.

''Do you know,'' said Joe, rousing himself from a brown study, ''I believe a fellow could live in a town like this on about five dollars a week.''

''Mary!'' said Polly, clasping her hands, ''You're going to have a new neighbor!''

CHAPTER XI

Even Joe joined in the general laughter that greeted this sally. Willy was particularly pleased. The mental picture of Joe buried alive in this stagnant little place appealed so strongly to him that he laughed until the tears came.

Polly stood looking down at him, fairly rocking with mirth in Mrs. Horton's disprized chair, with a smile of amused tolerance. It was not often that she made such a hit with Willy!

Unseen by any of them, a tall lank figure darkened the door which they had left opened behind them. For a moment the man hesitated before coming in. It was only when his grating voice fell on their ears that they were aware of his presence.

"An unusual honor for our little village," he said with a sneer. It was Horace Worth. Even Polly showed that she was disconcerted by his arrival.

"We just happened to be passing through," explained Joe lamely.

But Worth did not even look at him. The only one of the little party whom he con-

descended to notice at all was Merrick. Hatred and rage sparkled in his hard brown eyes as he met Merrick's unabashed glance.

"And you, sir? Did you also 'just *happen* to be passing through'?" Nothing could have been more insulting than his manner.

"Before I answer your polite questions," retorted Merrick coolly, "I want to know exactly what right you have to put them."

"From boyhood, I have been familiar with this house. I have the right to protect it from the presence of people like you!"

This short dialogue had given Mary time to recover herself. She had been badly frightened—not for herself, but for her mother; for it was apparent that Horace was in one of his ugliest moods, ripe for the carrying out of all his earlier threats—at his unexpected appearance.

"They are going in a moment, Horace," she said pleadingly. "Please don't make any trouble now. Mother is overtired as it is. She isn't strong enough to bear any excitement."

But Worth was not in a frame of mind to listen to any reason; from her least of all.

"I confess with shame that I have already failed in my duty when I kept silent about the life I found you living in New York. Fool that I was, I believed you when you said that life

was over for good. But now, that I find that this man has followed you here, I will keep silent no longer. It is your mother's right to know the truth."

He made a step toward the dining-room door, but Mary forestalled him by blocking his way.

"You shan't do it!"

"I forbid your interference here!" said Merrick, stepping to her side. It was the most injudicious thing he could have done. He realized that too late.

"*You* forbid!" Worth raised his clenched fist. Mary gave a stifled scream.

"What is the trouble here?" came a quiet voice from the doorway. It was Doctor Simpson. His steady eyes scanned each of the troubled faces in turn, dwelling a moment on Hilda's averted face.

"Doctor! Help me! Don't let Horace speak to mother!" cried Mary.

"I am going to tell her the truth," repeated Worth doggedly.

"He doesn't know the truth. His narrow, little mind can't credit any good to anyone beside himself! What he is going to say will kill my mother. It will break her heart!"

Doctor Simpson was at the angry man's side in two strides.

"Worth, I warn you that Mrs. Horton is in

no condition to bear any excitement, any shock."

"She has a right to know her daughter's danger. I am going to tell her just what and who these people are!"

"No, no! I forbid it." He caught Worth's wrist in an iron grip.

Worth struggled vainly to free himself. "Mrs. Horton! Mrs. Horton!" he called.

"Look out, Worth!" said Merrick threateningly.

"Mrs. Horton! Mrs. Horton!"

"Yes, yes, Horace! I'm coming! In just a minute!" Mrs. Horton's thin, little voice sounded impatient.

"As her physician, I forbid you to speak a word to my patient!"

"I'll save her from that man, no matter whether you forbid me or not!"

"Stop him, stop him, doctor!" implored Mary.

Merrick caught him by the arm. "Don't you dare speak!"

"Mrs. Horton! Mrs. Horton!" called Worth once more.

One of Merrick's hands shot out and clutched him by the throat. The doctor, pinioning him by the arms, jerked his head towards the open door. Merrick nodded that he understood.

They had hustled him across the room al-

most as far as the door with the evident purpose of throwing him bodily out of the house, when Mrs. Horton came slowly into the room. She looked woefully weak and exhausted. She was obliged to lean heavily on the back of the big chair as she paused just inside the room. For a moment she didn't seem to take in what was going on before her. Then her eyes suddenly dilated with fright.

"What is it?" she gasped.

"It's Mary!" Worth's voice was a hoarse scream.

"Mary!" Her terrified eyes flew to her daughter. One of her hands pressed tightly against her heart, she took another step forward.

"It's nothing, Mrs. Horton," said Doctor Simpson. He loosened his hold on Worth and went over to the side of his patient. "You mustn't excite yourself."

"What is it?" Her voice was so faint that only the doctor was able to catch the words. She was panting as if she had been running.

Mary threw her arms about her with a protecting gesture. "Mother, dear, you mustn't excite yourself. Don't listen to Horace. He's made a dreadful mistake. The doctor tells you it's nothing."

The appearance of Mrs. Horton was so palpably alarming that even Horace Worth,

blinded by passion as he was, could not have failed to see it. Even *he* could not go on with his self-imposed duty with that stricken old figure before him. Merrick, too, loosened his hold, and came over to Mrs. Horton.

"Mrs. Horton," he began, "it's only that this man——"

"It's something about my girl. I want to know it." She was shaking in Mary's arms, her breath still coming in long, quivering gasps.

"I love her! I want to marry her!" said Robert Merrick. He did not dare take his eyes from Mrs. Horton's face, even to glance at Mary. He heard her say "Oh!" under her breath.

"Mary marry you!" said Horace Worth contemptuously.

"What do you mean? What are you keeping from me?" Mrs. Horton's questioning glance rested on Worth's face.

"The truth!" he exclaimed violently. "You've got to know it!"

Merrick wheeled on him. His face was threatening.

"Stop!" "Remember! I warned you!" The two commands came from Merrick and the doctor simultaneously.

"Mother, don't listen to him," begged Mary.

Mrs. Horton's eyes closed, as if she no longer had the strength to keep them open. She was almost a dead weight in her daughter's arms. "Let him speak. He must!" she murmured.

"The story she wrote you of her work, of the sewing she had found to do, was like all the rest—a tissue of lies!" Worth's tone was exultant.

The effect of this cruel speech on the half-fainting woman was extraordinary. It was as if the shock had galvanized her into life. A wave of color flooded her face. Her widely opened eyes sparkled with indignation. She shook off her daughter's supporting arm, and standing erect, without even the support of the table, hurled her defiance at her girl's traducer.

"You shan't speak so about my daughter. She *did* work. Three times she sent me money!"

"His money!" He pointed at Merrick. "It was with him I found her."

"Don't listen to him, mother, dear! Listen to me! The things he says are false. You can't believe them!"

"I want to save her from herself; from these friends of hers, as they dare to call themselves! From men like this Merrick, and women like Hilda!"

"Hilda is Mr. Morgan's wife!" said Mrs. Horton sternly.

"His wife! She is his mistress! Just as Mary, your daughter, is——"

"Stop!" cried Mrs. Horton in a ringing tone, as Merrick started for Worth.

"I tell you I saw——"

"I don't want to know what you saw. I don't want to know the evil things I see in your face! You shan't say them. Do you think I would take your word against my daughter's? Against the baby I brought into the world, and loved and tended all these years?" She held out yearning arms, and Mary went straight to them. "If the thing you hint at is true, do you think I wouldn't know it? When I take her in my arms, do you think I don't read her heart? I do, I do! When she first came back to me, I read it. And it's clean, it's clean, it's clean!"

Her little, thin voice was high and shrill. But on the last word it broke. There was a choking rattle in her throat. Her clasp on Mary loosened. Her arms fell to her side. Her eyelids drooped as if she were suddenly overcome with the desire for sleep. She lifted one hand slowly, with great apparent effort, as if the movement were almost too much for her feeble strength, and pressed it against her heart.

She held out yearning arms, and Mary went straight to them.

Mary stood watching her, as did the others, with terrified eyes. But Doctor Simpson was ready. During her passionate arraignment of Horace Worth he had been busily rummaging in his black bag, and now he was at his patient's side. "Call Sadie to help you. Send everyone else out of the house," he said in a low tone to Mary.

"Go, go, all of you!" said Mary. But it was to Merrick she spoke. "And for God's sake take that man with you. He must be satisfied with his work now!"

"Come, Worth!" Merrick laid an authoritative hand on Worth's arm, and led him to the door. They all followed in a sort of panic of fear. Hilda, lingering for a moment with the intention of offering her services, was just in time to see Mrs. Horton reel and fall into the doctor's arms, as Sadie, in response to Mary's summons, came hurrying into the room. She followed the rest out, closing the door behind her.

The moon was up now, and the little, old-fashioned garden lay bathed in its silvery light. Here and there, the trees looked almost black in the shadow. Without speaking, Polly, Joe, and Willy seated themselves on the rustic seat that surrounded the largest of them. Horace Worth remained standing by the steps of the porch, his head sunk on his chest.

Hilda, pacing restlessly up the little graveled path that ran from the porch to the gate, glanced at him from time to time with a sort of scornful pity.

Did he at last realize what he had done? Had his pharisaical self-sufficiency at last been pierced by Mrs. Horton's anguish so that for once in his life he comprehended what a meanly abject figure he must appear in the eyes of even his own little world? Even Willy, whose standards of life and conduct left much to be desired, considered him a crawling sneak. How could anyone be so blinded by mistaken zeal and passion as to strike at a defenseless old woman, whose life, in the best conditions, seemed to hang by so slender a thread! Even if the shock did not prove to be fatal, and there was every chance that it would, could he cherish any hope of ever being forgiven by the doctor, by Mary, by any of Mrs. Horton's friends?

The utter dejection of his whole attitude expressed the bitter knowledge that his little world of hope had toppled about his devoted head.

And yet, she felt a measure of pity for him. He seemed to have a certain sincerity of character which was the mainspring of his actions. That his love for Mary was the biggest thing that had ever come into his life, Hilda believed. She could under-

stand—who better?—what such a shipwreck would mean. To wake each morning with the same dull heartache, the same hopelessness, the same regret! And to know that it would never be any better! Yes, much as she despised him, Hilda was sorry for him at last.

It was a long time before anyone spoke. From time to time, the light seemed to move in that little room upstairs, as if someone carried the lamp over to the bedside for a moment or two, and then returned it to the table. Occasionally the silhouette of Sadie's head etched itself strongly on the drawn window shade of the kitchen window. There was a certain comfort in watching the deft, swift manner in which she moved about. There was no nervousness, no uncertainty about the reliable Sadie. She knew what was expected of her, and she was energetically carrying out her part with no useless expenditure of emotion.

Hilda stifled an impulse to go to her for news. She felt sure that Sadie's manner, if not her words, would rebuke her for the interruption. No, there was nothing to do but wait and hope. She felt that she must be more deeply interested than any of the others—even Polly—in the outcome.

After all Mrs. Horton really meant nothing to any of them aside from the fact that she happened to be Mary's mother. But with her-

self, it was different. Any person or thing that remotely touched on her early life had an almost sacred significance, particularly since that terrible interview earlier in the day with Doctor Simpson.

Joe was the first one to break the silence. He spoke in a tone hardly above a whisper, with Polly. While Hilda could not catch his words, she was sure that he was urging the propriety of their starting away without delay. But Polly only shook her head.

Joe turned to Willy in the hope that he would back him up in his desire to get away from the disagreeable situation into which his selfish folly had led them, only to find that even the shadow of death could not keep Willy awake. With his head against the trunk of the old tree, Willy was slumbering as placidly as if he had been sitting at the card table at home. It has been remarked that Willy did not appear to the greatest advantage when wrapt in slumber. His heavy face, flushed with the difficulty of breathing in his uncomfortable position, looked coarser than ever. Hilda gave him a glance of shuddering disgust.

At the sound of the whispered conference between Joe and Polly, Horace Worth roused himself from his revery, and moved heavily towards the gate. Was he going? Hilda hoped he was. Merrick came quietly over and took

his stand beside her, just as Mary opened the door and came out on the porch.

"Your mother?" began Merrick.

"The doctor sent me away," said Mary in a lifeless tone. Her eyes were red with weeping.

Hilda sank down on the lowest step, and clasped her long arms about her knees.

"If we've killed her—among us—we ought to be killed ourselves! There is no excuse for us; none at all—for any of us!"

"Why don't you go?" demanded Worth, from the gate.

"We can't go! How can we? Without knowing just how much harm we have done."

"Why didn't you all stay where you belonged?" Worth came forward, his hands clenched at his sides. "You had all the rest of the world to choose from! Why couldn't you let us alone?"

It was Mary who answered him. And as he met her cold glance, Hilda saw hope die in his face.

"Their coming here *was* wrong. But it was nothing to what you did!"

"Mary! Don't say that! I did *what* I did for your sake!"

"No," said Mary steadily. "You did it because you were angry with me. And to hurt me, you wrung that poor old woman's heart.

We haven't much to be proud of," she went on bitterly, "none of us here. But there isn't one of us that would have done a thing like that!"

"Mary!"

Did she do it purposely, to stab him the more deeply before them all, these people whom he hated? Or was she unconscious of her use of the "we" and "us"? After all, what did it matter? She had ranged herself with them against him. If she had not done it with a purpose, it only showed how far away from him she had unconsciously drifted. He knew that he was beaten and defeated.

"*She* may forgive you—if you haven't killed her! But I won't. Never! Never! No matter what happens."

His hard mouth contracted with pain. He made a gesture of despairing renunciation, which was not without a certain dignity, and turned away.

"Looks like Little Lord Fauntleroy had stubbed his toe," came Polly's malicious voice.

Joe gave a grunt of disgust, and favored Worth with a glance of frank contempt.

"If it wasn't for the Sunday school gag, a guy like that couldn't make a living. He'd starve to death in New York!"

"Just think what ten cents' worth of insect

powder could have done for this community when he was young!" taunted Polly.

Worth was goaded into speech. "I did my duty. Your opinions matter nothing!" He scowled at the unabashed Polly.

"I suppose not. But it's a comfort to me, the letting you know it." She turned suddenly and shook Willy violently by the arm.

"Eh? What? What is it?" demanded Willy, only partly aroused.

"We're having charades, Willy! We want you to pretend that you're a human being—if you can!"

If the little group by the porch heard any of this dialogue, they gave no sign. Hilda and Mary each seemed lost in her own sad thoughts. If Mary were conscious of Robert Merrick's presence, she gave no sign. Nevertheless, he remained standing with his hands clasped on the little railing that flanked the steps leading up to the porch. His eyes were fixed on Mary's face. Pity and sympathy for her gave his face a new expression.

"Your mother's askin' for yer." It was Sadie, who had appeared quietly in the doorway. Her hard, bright glance took in the young man, who seemed to have eyes only for Mary, and the figure of Hilda crouched on the lower step. But her harsh voice was almost gentle.

Mary roused herself with an effort. "Oh!"

she said under her breath. She turned instinctively to Merrick. "I—I'm afraid, I'm afraid!" She threw out her hand with an appealing gesture. He took it in both of his own strong hands, giving her a pat of encouragement.

"Steady, Mary!"

For a moment she left her hand in his.

"I'll go," she said, turning towards the house.

Horace Worth had been watching them with somber jealousy.

"How is she?" He addressed himself to Sadie.

"I hate to disappoint you, Horace," said Sadie coldly, "but she's a lot better than you've any right to expect."

"I am not leaving with the others," said Merrick. He, too, looked at Sadie. "There must be *some* sort of a hotel in this place. I don't care how bad it is."

"Then you won't be disappointed," said Sadie, with her dry smile. "Straight down, on the other side of the street. Ther Palace Hotel, they call it."

"Thanks," said Merrick. He started towards the gate.

"Going to shake us?" inquired Willy, now thoroughly awake.

"Yes."

"Good luck to you," said Willy with something like enthusiasm. "You're a real sport! 'Phone me when you get back to old Broadway."

"I'm not going back to Broadway," said Merrick over his shoulder, as he started down the street.

"He's kidding us. He must be!" was Willy's comment.

"Bet you fifty he's back within the week," said Joe with decision.

"I'll take that bet," said Polly, getting up from her seat. "It's time we got out of this."

"If she is better, yes. We must go," said Hilda, rousing herself.

"Your things is all in ther sitting-room. You won't disturb her none, she's upstairs," volunteered Sadie.

"Ten o'clock!" said Joe, consulting his watch. "Come on, Polly."

Polly nodded in assent, and clinging to Joe's arm with, for her, an unusual desire for masculine support, she started for the house, followed by Willy. Hilda got slowly to her feet. The expression of hopeless weariness in her face would have aroused pity in almost any man. But the emotion it aroused in Willy was of a different nature. Having let Joe and Polly go into the house ahead of him, he laid a heavy detaining hand on Hilda's shoulder.

"What's the matter with you?" he said harshly. "I'm no fool. Don't you think it. Don't try to put anything over on me!"

"Hush, Willy!" She indicated Worth with a jerk of her head.

Willy gave a contemptuous snort to indicate how little he cared whether he was overheard or not.

"Get that look off your face. Stop that sniveling. I've had about enough of it to-day to last me a lifetime! Do you hear?" He frowned threateningly.

As he went heavily up the steps, Hilda threw out her hands with a despairing gesture. Without a word of protest, she followed him through the door. Around the corner of the house from the kitchen, Mary came hurrying to the pump, which had furnished Joe with so novel a sensation earlier in the day. In her hand she carried a large pitcher. As she started to fill it, Horace Worth joined her in a last effort at reconciliation.

"You will forgive me some day, Mary. In time you will grow to realize that I was only trying to save you. Don't tell me that you are going to harden your heart against me after all the years I have loved you, for doing what I believed to be my duty!"

"She is better, Horace," said Mary, not answering him directly. "Doctor Simpson says

that she bore the excitement splendidly. She is so much better than I dared to hope that I am too happy to quarrel with you. I am willing to admit that you may have thought what you did was right. But I wish you would go now, because I only want to be with her."

"I love you, Mary!"

For the first time she looked him directly in the face. "It isn't any use, Horace. I made up my mind to that to-night. I will never marry you."

"Because of what I did, or——"

"Partly that, I suppose. I don't just know myself. I haven't thought much of the reason for feeling as I do. But I know that I will never change my mind."

"You love this man, Merrick!" His jealousy threatened once more to get beyond his control.

"You have no right to say that!" protested Mary indignantly.

"But it is the truth. When you are with him, I see it in your face. When Sadie called you just now, you clung to his arm. You love him!" He grasped her roughly by the arm.

"Don't!" She made an effort to shake off his detaining hand. But he had still another question to ask.

"Do you mean to say that you believe what he said in there before them all to-night, that he would be willing to marry you!"

"Yes!" Her flushed face and flashing eyes should have warned him. But Horace Worth was beyond reading the signs.

"If you believed that, you never would have refused him!"

"I didn't refuse him!"

"You didn't say anything. You would have jumped at the chance if you had really believed him. But you knew better. You know what sort of a man he is. Do you think that your mother would have him in her house, if she knew what you know, what *I* know about him?"

"You know nothing about him! But even if you did, *she* need not know it. He is going away—they all are. They are getting their things now."

"He isn't going. He's gone to the hotel. Do you mean to say you didn't know it? He has no intention of going, until you are ready to go with him."

There was no mistaking the genuine astonishment in her face.

"You are mad! Besides, he has no right to stay behind!"

"Right!" said Horace Worth scornfully. He dropped Mary's arm, and started for the

house. It was her turn to make an effort to detain him.

"Mother wants to know about him, Horace. She asked me, and she is going to ask you. She—*she* says he's a good man."

"A good man! He!"

"Why not let her think so," pleaded Mary. "What possible harm can it do? She says she has seen something in his face that makes her know she could trust him. What's the good of attempting to shatter a faith like hers?"

"If she asks me about him, she shall know the truth!"

She tried another tack. "You need not fear for me any more."

"I trust you as little as I trust him!"

He took another step towards the house, but the way was blocked by Sadie, who stood on the threshold. She made no move to let the excited man pass. She might have been entirely unconscious of his presence for any sign she gave of seeing him. She looked directly at Mary.

"They're gettin' their things on to go. Ther doctor says your mother mustn't see 'em. But she wants to talk a minute with you, Horace." She turned her eyes on him, as if suddenly aware of his presence.

"With me?"

"Yes," said Sadie. "I'm sure I can't see why she should!" she added in dry comment.

"Horace, please, please don't tell her!" Mary clasped her hands in entreaty.

"I shall take care not to excite her, Mary. I promise you that. But I shall tell her the truth."

"I'll call Doctor Sim——" began Mary. But it was Sadie who took matters into her own capable hands. With a swift movement she closed the door behind her, just as Worth put his foot on the lowest step leading up to the porch. "You won't tell her anything at all!" she announced with unmistakable decision.

"She has sent for me. You just told me she had. And——"

"Well, you're not going to go to her. I'll tell her how sorry you were you couldn't wait!" Sadie's face was lighted by a grimly humorous smile. "You've done all ther harm you're ever goin' to do 'round this place. If there's any tellin' things to be done, I'll take a turn at it."

"Sadie! What do you mean?" cried Mary in amazement. She looked from one to the other for an answer.

"*He* knows." Sadie jerked her head in Worth's direction.

All the angry obstinacy had gone out of his

face. Mary could almost have found it in her heart to feel sorry for him. If ever a man looked as if his sin had found him out, that man was Horace Worth.

"I—*I*——" he stammered.

"Well, if you won't explain, I suppose I must," continued Sadie, with the same grim enjoyment. "Your mother told you about how good Horace was to me while you were away in New York, takin' me to prayer-meetin' every Wednesday night. But she *didn't* tell you what he said to me one time on ther way home. She didn't tell *that* because she didn't know about it. I didn't feel proud enough about it to tell anyone. Shall I tell 'em all about it now, Horace?"

Worth made no answer, unless his flushed face and bowed head could be considered an answer.

"I won't tell, unless you make me," Sadie went on, after waiting a moment for him to reply. "As I said, I ain't proud of it. I'm only ashamed to think I ever trusted you!"

"Sadie!" Mary looked at her in wonder.

"You needn't worry. I guess I know how to take care of myself. *He* thought"—her tone had changed to one of withering contempt—"that just because I was poor, and was workin' out, that I'd forgotten all my folks ever taught me! My folks is just exactly as good as his—

only they never felt they had any call to talk so much about it!"

With a final contemptuous look, she stalked into the house.

At the sound of the closing door, Horace Worth raised his head.

"Mary!"

"Please go," she said in cold disgust.

"Won't you let me ex——"

"Go!" she repeated in righteous anger. She pointed to the gate with a commanding gesture. He went without a word.

At the gate, he turned towards her once more. With an effort, pitiably weak, to recover some semblance of dignity, he drew himself up to his full height.

"You've made your choice. I know that you'll live to regret it!"

But he read in her face only an immeasurable disdain.

CHAPTER XII

She was still standing where he had left her, when Hilda came out of the house. She was dressed once more in her automobile coat, her long veil wound about her head.

"You are going, Hilda?" said Mary sadly.

"Yes. What else is there for me to do?"

"I wish I could help you, dear!"

"I know you do, Mary, but you can't; no one can." Her voice broke a little. The hard impassiveness of her face was shattered by sudden emotion. Her mouth trembled, and she twisted her long gloves into a rope.

"There's nothing else for me to do," she went on, answering her own question. "And yet, how can I stand it any more? Mary! How can I! Oh, why must people go on living? Now that I know—now that *he* has told me, it seems as if I just couldn't. And yet I will!" She gave a bitter, little laugh. "I am too much of a coward to take the only way out of it!"

"Hush, Hilda! You mustn't say that. You mustn't even *think* such things."

"Mary, your mother is asking for you," said Doctor Simpson, coming down the steps.

"No," in answer to the look of sudden anxiety which he read in her face, "she is quite well, and strangely contented and happy. But she wants to see you, and I must speak to Hilda, here."

Mary went over and put her hand on Hilda's shoulder, holding up her fresh, young face for a kiss.

"I'll see you for a moment again before you go. Promise me."

Hilda nodded without speaking.

"She's very unhappy, doctor," Mary whispered, as she passed him on her way into the house.

"Hilda," he said gently. "Won't you come over and sit here for a moment?" He pointed to the rustic seat under the tree. "I want to talk to you."

Still silent, she followed him and seated herself on the bench. As he stood, towering above her, one hand leaning against the trunk of the old tree, he found it hard to make a beginning. The hopeless misery in the eyes she raised to his made speech impossible for the moment. With a visible effort he regained his self-control.

"Mrs. Horton has been very unhappy about you, Hilda. Not about Mary; her faith in *her* never wavered nor faltered. It is a beautiful thing, such faith as she has!"

"I'm going to find work for you there—good work. That's going to be my life and yours."

Hilda's lips formed the word "Yes," but no sound came from them.

"I have promised Mrs. Horton that you will not go back to New York, Hilda. Did I do right?"

"Ned!"

The hopeless look left her eyes. But in them there was the beginning of a question which he understood. Again, pity for her choked him. For the answer to the question which she longed for he could not give honestly. And he must be honest both with himself and her, at the cost of any present pain to them both. And yet, he was conscious that his heart was beating with an emotion that he had not felt for years. And a little spark of the same hope that he read in her face flickered there for a moment—and went out. Time might rekindle it. But not yet.

"We are hoping to build a Children's Hospital a few miles from here, over towards Coopersville. I am going to find work for you there. It will be hard work, but it will be good work. That will be your life and mine—to help those poor, suffering little ones."

She clasped her hands in her lap. Her breath came in long painful gasps.

"And you will be there sometimes, then? We will work—together?"

"Yes, Hilda."

She buried her face in her hands for a minute. When she took them away, the tears were running down her cheeks, but the smile she gave him had nothing of bitterness nor sadness in it. Her face had the pathetic wistfulness of a little child who has been punished and understands that it is forgiven. The sound of Willy's grating voice came to her from the door of the house. But she didn't even take in what he was saying.

"Come on, then. Let's be on our way. It's high time."

The light from the little sitting-room streamed out through the door, in which Sadie could be seen, lamp in hand, bidding Polly a reserved good-by. Mary was nowhere to be seen, but Joe, Willy, and Polly were apparently ready to start. Hilda realized that they were only waiting for her.

"Where *is* Hilda?" asked Willy querulously. And then, catching sight of her tall figure under the tree with the doctor: "Come on, Hilda!" he called.

"Hilda is going to stay here," said Doctor Simpson quietly. He turned and faced Willy as he spoke.

"What's that?"

"Hilda remains here."

Willy gave a sort of snort of contempt.

"Hilda, come on!" he repeated.

"This is your chance," said the doctor, in a low tone. "Not for happiness, perhaps. I can't promise you that. But for peace, for renewed self-respect."

"What *is* all this?" demanded Willy with his air of a fretful child.

"What is it, Hilda?" asked Polly wonderingly.

"Hilda has decided to stay here in her old home, among her old friends," the doctor again answered for her.

Willy's face flushed that unhealthy, purplish-red that it so often did, particularly lately, when he made any unusual exertion.

"Is that right?" he demanded thickly.

"Yes." Hilda's tone was quiet. But she met Willy's angry glare firmly.

At the sound of her voice, at the undaunted glance of her eye, Willy, who had been making what was for him an astonishing effort to restrain himself from giving way to his rage—and, even now, he was acting from selfish motives. Some fool of a doctor had told him only a week ago that to continue to indulge himself in vicious outbursts of temper might have most unpleasant consequences—threw caution to the four winds of Heaven.

"So! That's the game, is it? You throw me! Me! Give up all you've got! New York-Broadway-Money-Clothes-Everything!!" His

voice continued to grow higher and shriller as he enumerated these blessings, until it broke on a weak falsetto.

"Yes, everything!" said Hilda, with quiet scorn.

"They all know what you are here, don't they? *He* knows what you are, don't he? Or have you forgotten to tell him that!"

"Yes; he knows."

"He knows that you're only a thing I bought, as I have bought dozens——"

Doctor Simpson made a stride forward.

"Wait!" Hilda laid a detaining hand on his arm. "Let me speak!"

She drew herself up to her full height. She actually seemed to tower above them all, even above the doctor. Her eyes blazed. Her face was white with passion. She was magnificent —regal—in her rage. Confronted with her, Willy, with his fat, coarse face, now changed to a grayish pallor, his popping light eyes, suffused with blood, might have been the mantoad from some grotesque legend. Compared with her righteous anger, his impotent outburst was no more than the snarl of a kicked cur that has stealthily snapped at your heels.

"Yes! He knows you bought me, and he knows I've paid you back fourfold. But *you* don't know the hatred I've always had in my

heart for you! The self-contempt that burned me, that gnawed at my heart like a rat gnawing at a beam, at the bare thought of you! You didn't know that, did you? No! Men like you never know that! You think that when you buy a woman's body with your money, you buy her love with it. But you don't, you don't! Money never bought love since the world began. I may be the first woman who ever told you the truth, but I am not alone in feeling as I do. Half the women who are living as I have lived jealously keep their hearts free to hate the men who pay them to smile on them! Free to hate as I have always hated you, and as I will always hate you!" She paused for a moment. "Well, have you anything more to say to me, or about me?"

But Willy's venom was nearly spent. With a last effort he turned and snarled at the doctor.

"She got this dope from you!" He shook a fat fist vaguely in the air. Then, as if realizing that he must do something to "make good" in his own eyes, if not in those of the other two men, he tried again.

"You conned her into this, damn you!"

With a movement that was so sudden, so unexpected—possibly to no one more than to Willy himself—that it caught the doctor completely off his guard, the fat fist shot straight

at his face. He escaped it only by jerking his head back. The same instinct prompted him to put up his hands. Polly gave a little scream of fright. Joe uttered an amazed exclamation. Impulsively, he started for his friend's side.

But Willy's bolt was shot. Coincident with Joe's movement, Doctor Simpson had realized that Willy was hardly a person from whom he needed to defend himself physically. His professional eye noted the fact that his miserable opponent was on the verge of collapse. He seized Willy by both wrists in his powerful grasp, which alone kept him from crumpling up at his feet.

"Look out, Morgan," he said sternly. "Anger isn't good for a man like you."

Half supporting, half dragging him, he got Willy over to the seat under the tree.

"Get my bag, will you, Garfield? It's in the sitting-room, on the table. Hilda, will you get me some water?"

But Hilda made no movement to obey. It was uncertain whether she even understood him. She stood looking down at Willy, who was shaking as if with ague, panting and gasping for breath, with terrified eyes.

It was Polly who ran to the pump, and returned with a dipper of water. The doctor tore open Willy's vest.

"You are dizzy now, aren't you? My God, man, your heart is pumping like a steam engine! Your flesh is flabby, and you are in a cold perspiration. Wait, you'll get your breath easier in a moment."

With a moan, Willy pressed his hand to his side.

"Do you feel pain there?"

"Th-at's m-y bus-iness!" Willy managed to say between his clenched teeth.

"It's your death! Don't you know that Nature keeps her reckoning with men like you? You who never hesitate to gratify your appetites, your greed, your lusts!"

"I——" Willy's voice trailed off weakly into silence.

Joe, coming out of the house with the bag, gave the doctor a keen glance, and went to the side of the tree and supported Willy with an arm about his shoulders.

"He's been like that several times before," volunteered Polly.

"No doubt," returned the doctor dryly.

He threw out nearly all the water from the dipper onto the ground, and dropping a few drops of a pungent liquid from one of the bottles in his case into what remained, held the dipper to Willy's lips.

"Quick! Drink this."

It seemed to afford the sick man almost in-

stant relief. With a long sigh, he leaned his head back against the tree trunk, and closed his eyes. His lips still twitched convulsively, but his breath was coming easier and more naturally.

For several minutes, no one spoke. Doctor Simpson stood watching his patient with an anxious frown. At length he gave a little nod of satisfaction. For the moment, at least, his patient was out of danger. The thing to do would be to get him away. He didn't propose risking the effect of further excitement on Mrs. Horton, not if he knew it.

For the moment, he weighed the idea of offering to take the sick man to his own house, rather than sending him to the hotel. While the idea was naturally repugnant to him—for the best of doctors are men first, and this man had not only wronged but grossly insulted the woman he loved—he had about decided to tender him the hospitality of his home, when Willy decided the question for himself.

"Well, I've certainly got to hand you one, doctor," he said, opening his eyes. "You've brought me round quicker than any doctor I've ever found. I owe you that—as well as some other things!"

Once more his face had resumed its normal hue of mottled red and white. He drew a long breath, as if the knowledge that he could still

do so without pain gave him infinite pleasure. He rose, supported by Garfield's arm.

"That's the worst attack I ever had, but I'm all right now."

"For the moment—yes," said the doctor gravely.

"Come on, Joe. We'll go. I tell you I'll be all right as soon as I get out of here."

He turned, and made as if he would hold out his hand to the doctor with an effort at reconciliation. It almost seemed as if he had forgotten Hilda. But in turning, his eye fell upon her. She was standing as she had stood ever since the moment of his seizure. Her troubled eyes were on his face. For a second, it looked as if he were about to have a second attack. The dark flush of rage flooded his face once more. He pointed to her with a shaking, accusing finger. "This is all your fault! You——"

"Stop! Take him away, Garfield," came the doctor's ringing tone. "I am only human. My temptation here is not to cure but to kill!"

"That's all right," muttered Willy. "Don't drag me, Joe. I guess I've got to be good! You're a hard man, doctor, damned hard. I'll laugh at this to-morrow. But to-night, I guess —well, I guess you've got my goat!" And without another look in Hilda's direction, he

crossed to the gate, leaning heavily on Joe's arm.

"Come on, Polly," said Joe, over his shoulder.

Polly had been standing with her eyes on the ground. When she raised them, Hilda saw that they were hard and bright with suppressed tears.

"Well, good-by," she said slowly. "I'd sort of like to see Mary and tell her good-by, too."

"I'll call her," said Doctor Simpson kindly.

He had just reached the steps when the door opened and Mary came out. She took in the situation at a glance.

"Polly!" She flew to her friend's side. She could not let her go! Dear, generous, big-hearted Polly!

"Must you go back—to *that?*" There was love and longing in Hilda's voice. She held out her arms with a gesture of protection.

"Sure, I must!" said Polly. Her voice was hardly above a whisper. And then two tears—big tears, like a child's—suddenly rolled down her cheeks. She made no pretense of concealing them, nor did she attempt to wipe them away with the wisp of handkerchief she held in her hand.

She came over and stood between Mary and Hilda, an arm round the waist of each. Her gay, little, defiant head drooped for a moment

on Hilda's shoulder. When she raised it again, it was to wink back the tears that were threatening to follow the others.

"You're sure a couple of real pals, all right, all right! I don't kid myself, girls, you're getting all the best of it. But I—I'm on my way."

"Not if you care to stay, Miss Polly," said Doctor Simpson eagerly.

But Polly only shook her head again. "I ain't ready yet. They are, but it's different with them. Mary belongs, and Hilda's got another chance. I wouldn't have, *really*. You see with me, there's nobody that cares, really cares. That's what makes the difference."

She spoke quite simply, which made her words all the more pathetic. As she finished, she looked at Doctor Simpson with her wise eyes, which always seemed years too old for her childish face.

"Polly——" began Hilda.

"No use," said Polly, and she turned towards the gate.

In their innermost hearts, her hearers knew that she was right.

"Are you coming, or aren't you, Polly?" called Joe's voice from the road outside. And they heard him add, presumably for their benefit, although the remark was ostensibly addressed to Willy: "Can you beat it! The time it takes a woman to say 'Good-by'!"

"You will let me know sometimes how you are, Polly?" pleaded Mary.

At the gate Polly turned.

"Write? No, I guess not. But don't worry about me. Just keep on looking, and some morning you'll see the parcel-post man coming through this gate. And in his hand he'll have a nice little box of new-laid eggs—white ones, from a white hen. So long!"

She gave them her impish smile, which always made her look like an impudent boy. And then, she too, turned the corner out of sight.

"Poor little Polly! Poor little Polly!" said Mary. She sat down on the bench and looked at the others with tear-brimmed eyes.

"I am going to take Hilda to your mother, Mary," said the doctor, after a moment. "You know she wants to see her."

"Oh, I'm afraid!"

"There is nothing to fear," he reassured her. "Not now. You have done the big thing. The rest is going to be easier every day. You know Mrs. Horton of old, and you know how she will help you. There will be some black days, some hard hours when everything will look dark, but we are going through with it, Hilda. *We* are going to win."

Again that look which made her face so beautiful, because it displaced the dreary hopeless-

ness which had come to be its natural expression, transformed her.

"I mean to try," she said simply, holding out her hand.

The doctor took it in his own, and together they went to find Mrs. Horton.

For a long time Mary sat under the old tree. She had much to occupy her thoughts. Now that her mother was safely out of danger—and even without Doctor Simpson's assurance on that point, she had another sign which was almost as sure as proof of Holy Writ: Sadie, from the kitchen, was, more or less tunefully, inviting all who came within the sound of her voice to "Pull for the Shore"—she could go over the events of this eventful day with an untroubled mind.

What a day it had been! She felt that there was no note in the scale of human emotion that she had not touched in those crowded hours. She felt that it had been one of the Decisive Battle days of her life. And it had been almost worth it, in that it had settled forever the vexed question of her marriage to Horace Worth. Only this morning—how long ago this morning seemed!—she had almost decided to marry him to please her mother. Could she ever be sufficiently thankful that her purpose had been deflected!

She would probably never marry anybody.

As long as her mother lived, she would stay with her. Perhaps the doctor could find some way that she, too, could earn the little that they needed, as she knew he had promised Hilda. And then, some day, when she was quite old, after her mother was gone, she would work in the hospital in which the doctor was so much interested. Perhaps she could keep the old house as a sort of branch hospital for the convalescents.

The doctor and Hilda! How beautifully that was all going to turn out. Oh, perhaps not for a long time. It would take time to heal the wounds of both. But there was no doubt that they still loved one another. And with love as a foundation, the House of Happiness could still be built.

And Polly. Poor, dear, little Polly. Would her simple dream ever come true? And would she find in its attainment all that she hoped?

And then, at last, although she had been warding it off as long as possible, the thought of Robert Merrick and his offer of marriage would come into her mind. She had defiantly told Horace Worth that she knew that he meant it. But did he? In a way, yes. Acting on a generous impulse he had offered to marry her to save her reputation. But even if she loved him—and Mary was by no means prepared to admit even to herself that she did—

she would die before she would accept any offer made under such conditions.

Why was he lingering behind the others? Had he any thought that she did not understand his motives? Well, she would disabuse his mind of any such idea the first time she saw him. After that, he would go away, and she would never see him again. Oh, how complex and dreary life was! How long and lonely the road seemed when one was still young!

There came a step along the road outside which she knew, and which made her heart beat in her breast as if she had been running. The latch of the gate clicked. Another moment and he was beside her.

"Mary!"

"It wasn't fair, it wasn't fair," she said, "for you to stay!"

"I want you to be my wife."

"There was no need for you to say that again. I quite understood when you told my mother that you wanted to marry me, *why* you did so. But I cannot accept any such offer. I do not want your pity! I——"

"It wasn't from pity, Mary."

"It was to save me in my mother's eyes. I should thank you, I suppose, but I don't! I only want you to go!"

"Give me my chance!" he pleaded.

"Please go!" was all she said.

"Very well." Merrick got up. But his air was not the air of a man who has accepted defeat. "I'll go now, since you wish it. But I am going to stay here right along until you convince me that you can never really learn to care for me. If you forbid me to come and see you, I shall come and stand outside the gate! I mean it," he added with a whimsical smile.

He waited for a moment. Then as she did not even look up, he lifted his hat with a simple, "Good-night, Mary," and was gone.

Mary did not move until the sound of his firm buoyant step had died away in the distance.

"He *does* mean it!" she whispered under her breath.

And her eyes were shining like stars.

CHAPTER XIII

The weeks that followed were among the strangest that Hilda had ever experienced. There were times when, waking up in the night in the tiny bed in her little room at Mrs. Horton's, she had the uncanny feeling that she must have died and begun her existence in another planet. It seemed impossible to believe that anything so sharply contrasted with the life that had become almost a second nature to her could come within the scope of a single existence.

It was not the mere material fact that the simple country life she was now leading presented in itself any great novelty. Hilda was country-born and country-bred. She was continually finding herself surprised at the number of things she remembered, rather than at the number of things she had forgotten. The sharpness of the transition lay entirely within herself, in her attitude of mind.

She had been little more than an inexperienced child when she had taken that fatal step which led her away from Great Falls. How drearily long ago it seemed. If she had needed any gauge to measure how far she had come

since that far-off day, she would only have had to conjure up before her mental vision the picture of Sam Loveridge, the traveling salesman, who had, by his glowing pictures of the life open to a pretty girl in a great city, tempted her to try her fortunes with him.

The very thought of him made her shudder. How common and vulgar he was. Even Willy was refined by contrast. And yet she was able to draw one small drop of comfort from the murky recollection. She had never even pretended to be in love with Sam Loveridge. He was only a means to an end. If she had shamelessly used him, he had deserved no better at her hands.

There was only one thing that marred the perfect peacefulness of her days; a fear that arose from the profound distrust that she had of her own nature. She had been perfectly sincere when she had said to Doctor Simpson the night of their first meeting that she knew that there was something essentially wrong in her own nature; more than could be accounted for by a weak, pleasure-loving disposition.

No, the warp in her moral nature lay deeper than that. And Hilda feared that she alone could trace it to its source. Years before, when she was hardly more than a baby, before she had ever come to Great Falls to live, her mother had deserted her husband and

child to cast in her lot with a member of a traveling circus. What had ever been her ultimate fate, her child had never known. From the day of her departure her name had never been mentioned by her husband until he was on his death-bed. Then he had told his daughter of her shameful inheritance. And Hilda had never shared the secret with anyone.

But she had secretly brooded over it all through her girlhood until she was unable to give it its proper value in relation to her own existence. When she had first listened to Sam Loveridge's persuasive tongue, she had known that he had only to urge her a little more strongly to induce her to yield to him. It was in the blood, she had said to herself. Why fight against it?

She had in this manner built up for herself, through weakness, a sort of dreadful theory of the uselessness of fighting against her inheritance. That the sins of the fathers were visited upon the children, she accepted in an enlarged interpretation. It was not the *consequences* alone of these sins sown by their ancestors that the children must reap in bitterness, but the sins themselves were to be their portion, bringing the same old consequences in their train. An endless circle from which there was no escape!

This, then, was the root of her fear. Would

not the old temptation be irresistible? Who could assure her that the impulse to return to the old life might not return at any moment? That up to now she had felt no such inclination argued nothing. The quiet uneventfulness of the life she was now leading was as soothing to her tired nerves and heart as a bath to a wearied body. But when once she had recovered her "tone," would not the old desires repossess her?

Loneliness and the realization that there was no one to care for her, no one for whom she had the right to care, had been contributing causes to her downfall originally. In what had her condition changed? The only man who had ever had the quickening power to awaken love in her breast would never, in spite of the fact that his former love for her had kept him from loving any other woman, dream of making her, stained and dishonored as she was, his wife, and the mother of his children! And even if he would, how could she ever bring herself to consent! How could she ever dare to bring children into the world, knowing what would be their portion from their mother! And so, although she felt that her only hope of safety, her only hope of salvation, indeed, lay in his love, could she save her miserable self at so great a price?

And yet she knew she would never have the

strength to work at his side, to see him daily as he proposed. How little he knew women! How little he knew her, to imagine that she would ever be content with a so-called Platonic friendship.

And so the fear that some day—not now, but later—she might be driven to appease her heart-hunger by a return to her old life, to drug memory with forgetfulness, haunted her waking hours and some of the hours which were supposedly devoted to rest and sleep.

To be sure, it was most often at night that she was troubled with these forebodings. In the cheerful company of Mary and her mother the busy days passed swiftly and almost happily. It would have been hard, indeed, to be anything but hopeful in the society of such an incurable optimist as Mrs. Horton. And the tonic effect of her never-flagging faith that everything in this troubled world made for good in the end could not fail to influence so impressionable a person as Hilda.

Still, there were times when, forgetting her work, her hands would drop idly in her lap, and all the fears, born of a morbid attitude of mind, would sweep over her afresh. She never noticed that Mary and her mother would exchange significant glances at these moments. They never left her to herself

too long. Always, at the end of a few minutes, Mrs. Horton would think of something that had to be done that was too much for her to attempt alone, and would arouse Hilda to beg her assistance.

Gradually, as the days went by, these "attacks of the blues" became less and less frequent. Hilda began to feel a self-confidence that she had never known before. A new courage and resolve grew within her. In the new environment which the opening of the proposed hospital would provide, she would try as she had never tried before to conquer the tendency to evil that she firmly believed was in her blood.

She was honest enough with herself never to pretend that the hope of reward—*the* reward which her whole being craved—did not linger on in her heart. Lacking that, where would have been her incentive? And this faint spark of hope was fed by the remembrance that he had confessed that he still loved her, although he had qualified his admission in saying that "nothing could make things as they were before." But when he saw—and his eye was keen—that she had conquered, might he, on his side, not grow big enough to forgive her?

With a patience and resolution new to her yielding nature, she resolved to make one last

great fight for the happiness she had never known.

It had been decided the day following the departure of the others that, until the hospital was open, Hilda should make her home with Mrs. Horton. Where else, indeed, could she go? What other house in Great Falls would have been open to her? Mrs. Horton, herself, would listen to no other plan. Mary had warmly seconded her mother's invitation and Doctor Simpson had welcomed this solution of a problem which had kept him pacing the floor of his study far into the night. Hilda, only, had demurred at it; and for one reason alone. The question of money troubled her.

It was perfectly impossible in the circumstances to live at the Hortons' without contributing to the expenses. With the debts accruing on account of the old lady's illness, it had even been decided that they could no longer keep Sadie with them, although Sadie worked with no other compensation than her "keep." How, then, could they offer a home to Hilda except on a paying basis? To be sure, she would have cheerfully done the work that had fallen to Sadie. But the only change in the situation would have been that she was taking Sadie's place. Sadie would be worse off, and no one else any better.

Hilda's purse contained a little over eight-

een dollars. Besides the small bag which contained the few articles she had hastily thrown into it, in case they did not return to New York that night, she had only the dress she was wearing, a light pongee gown, her automobile coat and veil. Both Hilda and Mary were expert needlewomen. Together they could easily contrive the few simple dresses which Hilda would require. But there were the necessary materials to be bought.

Hilda confided her troubles to the doctor the morning after her arrival, as they paced up and down the garden path. She admitted to him that she still possessed a few hundreds in the bank which she had saved from time to time from the allowance, liberal but irregular, which Willy had made her. His face had darkened while she was speaking of it. But when she told him that she had already made up her mind to send for her bank-book to be balanced, and then forward a check for the amount, with a note of explanation, to Willy's lawyer, he had beamed on her with such approval that she felt more than rewarded.

Of course he solved the problem with masculine directness. He would be her banker for the present. He had, as he had told her, an income far greater than his simple necessities demanded. When she hesitated, he reminded her that by the fall she would be beginning to

earn a small salary at the hospital. She could take her own time about paying it back.

Together they agreed on the sum that she should pay Mrs. Horton for board and lodging, making it sufficiently large to allow of Sadie's services being retained. This, as he pointed out later to Mrs. Horton, was as much for Hilda's sake as for her own. Nothing would have disabused Sadie's mind of the idea that she was being supplanted by Hilda. And Sadie's tongue was bitter.

Hilda would have a hard enough time making a position for herself in the face of the vague rumors that already existed about her mode of life in New York without having to combat the fact that she had returned masquerading as Willy's wife until she was exposed by Horace Worth. Of Horace's silence they could feel tolerably sure as long as Sadie was on their side.

After a long talk with the doctor, Mrs. Horton abandoned all objections to the arrangement. She was still too weak to leave her bed, so, for the time being, both the girls devoted themselves to her, and Hilda, wearing one of Mary's simple gowns, helped with the house and took her turn in looking after the invalid, finding to her delight that she had not forgotten her old domestic accomplishments, and disclosing a natural aptitude for caring for the

sick which promised well for her success in her new career.

It remained for Polly to stretch out a helping hand in her usual generous fashion.

Mrs. Horton was about again, still complaining that everyone was in a conspiracy to treat her like a baby, and rebelling against her enforced inaction. Partly to give her some light occupation, and partly because the question of the new wardrobe had to be settled, the girls had begun making their plans for a busy time with the dressmaking. Together they had made out a list of what it was absolutely necessary to have, and Hilda had decided to send to New York for the materials, when two closely packed trunks arrived, consigned to her from New York.

On opening the larger one, the first thing that met Hilda's eye was an envelope directed in Polly's scrawling hand. It contained a brief letter, and a substantial check with Polly's signature at the bottom.

Polly hoped that Hilda would find that she had forgotten nothing. She had packed everything, old and new. The flat was already given up, and the furniture stored. Joe, it appeared, had business which would take him to London for several weeks. Polly had decided to go with him. Whether she would return when he did, she had not decided.

If she did, she would look out for a new place where she would be alone. Certainly she did not propose to share a flat with anyone else again. She was a goose, as Hilda knew. Who could tell but she might grow fond of someone again. And that, she had resolved never to do again. It made too much of a wrench when it came to the parting of the ways.

And, oh yes! She had almost forgotten. Hilda would find that none of her jewelry was in the trunk. It was perfectly safe in Polly's safe deposit box. Polly had had an idea that jewelry was not much worn in Great Falls, especially by nurses in hospitals. Also, she had had an idea that, for the moment, money might be a handy thing to have about the house. It often was!

Therefore, she had taken the liberty of advancing a little of the necessary on Hilda's jewelry. At any time that Hilda wished, she could have it again. She had explained it all to her lawyer. He had his instructions to forward it all at any time that Hilda wished for it. Of course the money was to be paid back at Hilda's convenience—or not at all. Also, if Hilda should not want it again, of course Polly would be glad to buy it at Hilda's own figure. At any moment, Polly might decide to embark on a theatrical career as a chorus girl. And it would be so much easier

to get an engagement if she was covered with jewels! And now she must stop. She had a lot of packing of her own to do. They were sailing in the morning. The letter was without date or address.

Thrusting the letter into Mary's hand, Hilda rushed from the room.

Mary read it aloud to her mother, choking several times before she finished it.

"How like Polly!" was her only comment.

CHAPTER XIV

If anything, Sadie's remarks about the Palace Hotel had been understated. It was about as bad as it could possibly be. The rooms were dingy and dark, the carpets were so full of dust that it was beyond belief that they had ever been taken up since that far-off day when they had first been nailed to the floors. Room service, there practically was none. A solitary boy who looked as if he had always just been aroused from sleep eventually made his way up the stairs in response to the ring of any guest inconsiderate enough to summon him. But he usually calculated—and calculated rightly—that if he only delayed long enough, the guest would give up in despair and go without whatever he had fancied he wanted.

The table had two conspicuous faults. The food was badly cooked, and there was never enough of it. What society the place afforded could be found only at the bar, and that at limited hours. During the day, except for perhaps a few minutes at noon time, the place was deserted even by the bartender, who acted as hotel clerk as well.

The few regular guests of the hotel seemed

to regard each other with common suspicion. After a day or two, Bob Merrick understood their attitude. Anyone who would consent to take up his abode in any such place would excite suspicion in the mind of an angel!

It was not that he was dependent on luxuries. He had sweated, starved, and generally roughed it too many years for that. Nor was it that he had been spoiled by the sybaritism of his life in New York. He had known solitude and loneliness, too. There had been times when he had been weeks without exchanging a syllable with a human being. But that had been because there were no human beings within miles. *This* was totally different. *This* was a new experience. The drab dreariness of the prospect that stretched before him which sticking to his resolution would involve would have appalled anyone lacking his fixed purpose. That he had a fixed purpose made anything possible.

He had roughly mapped out a plan of campaign the night after Mary had dismissed him in the garden. It was to be a siege, apparently. So be it! He had an idea that he could stand it as long as she could. If he had not been honestly convinced that he could teach Mary to learn to love him, if he had not even thought that she was more nearly in love with him now than she had ever been with anyone, he would

have gone away and left her as she seemed to wish him to. He was not a hunter of women in the sense that Willy Morgan was, for example.

Mary had reproached him with being unfair. But that reproach he easily dismissed. Had she never heard the truism about all being fair in love? And he was in love. He could not mistake the symptoms. He had been in love once before in his young manhood. Only this time there was this difference: if love was not to be won this time, it would never enter into his life again. He was older now. He knew himself. This was his last chance for happiness. If he missed it again, he would accept the dictum of the gods that he was one of those unlucky beings who are destined to loneliness for life; one who may, by chance, rub elbows with Happiness, but never clasp her in his arms.

What he should do if he failed in his suit, he would leave for the future to decide. One thing, however, was certain. He had had his fill of the life of the cities. The plains and forests of his own country should know him again. He need never again work as he had worked for money. But there was much that one could do *with* money in the world that one need not blush to remember.

He had decided to let at least a week pass

before he would trouble his lady-love with his presence again. But having entered into certain negotiations in which money was alluded to, and a sort of retaining fee changed hands, with the reluctant boy-of-all-work at the hotel, he arranged that that drowsy and untidy youth should present himself each morning at Mary's door to inquire after the health of her mother, with Mr. Merrick's compliments.

There was no way of assuring himself that his message was correctly delivered. But that the youth duly presented himself at the hour agreed upon between them he made sure. All he had to do to satisfy himself on that point was to walk slowly towards the Horton house ten minutes after the messenger had started. He was always in time to see him enter the gate from a safe distance.

"She says she's all right." This was the laconic reply that was repeated to him every day, without variation.

No need to ask if he had seen Mrs. Horton herself. He felt that he knew her well enough to know that she would have sent a far different response. Nor did he think that it had passed through a species of editing at the hands of the local Mercury. If that worthy's brain could have been said to possess any distinguishing characteristic, it was lack of imagination. It was clear that he was only repeating,

parrot-like, words that had been repeated to him. Merrick smiled grimly. In this discouraging brevity, he read that Mary's purpose was no less inflexible than when she had last disclosed it to him.

It was her pride that was erecting this barrier between them. Pride and a fear of being pitied. Whatever could have put such a nonsensical notion into her head! Did he look like a man who would impulsively offer himself to a woman out of pity? He could conceive of doing so if he had really compromised a woman; if the fault had been wholly his. But Mary had been compromised in no eyes but those of that fanatical fool, Horace Worth. Moreover, Merrick had a shrewd suspicion that Worth's sincerity was not beyond question. It was perfectly patent that he was in love with the girl himself. Truly, he had original ideas of the way to win a woman. To try to smirch her reputation in the eyes of those she held dearest, and then, as it were, rehabilitate her by marrying her!

On the fifth day of the siege, he fired his second gun. A long night letter to one of New York's leading florists arranged for the delivery, every day, Sunday included, of a box of roses of a variety which he knew Mary especially admired to Miss Mary Horton at Great Falls, New Hampshire.

Suddenly realizing the sensation that such a telegram would excite in the breast of the local telegrapher, he had started early one morning, after chaperoning his messenger as usual, as far as Mrs. Horton's gate, and walked to a neighboring town, eight miles away. He had no notion of causing Mary any unnecessary embarrassment. According to his own lights, he would play the game fairly.

It was on the return trip that he ran into Doctor Simpson. The doctor, it seemed, had driven out to see one of his patients in an outlying district. As it chanced, they had not encountered one another since the night they had mutually endeavored to suppress Horace Worth. To the best of Merrick's recollection, they had never exchanged a half dozen words. But on that occasion they had had no need of words to establish a perfect understanding.

Nevertheless, this chance meeting was not without the element of embarrassment. Merrick had taken to this country doctor at once, at their first meeting. If there was one thing more than another that he prided himself upon, it was his ability to judge men. And he had recognized a sincerity and singleness of purpose in this silent, undemonstrative man the moment he had seen him.

For this reason, he resented more than he would ordinarily have done the fact that the

doctor seemed just a little more surprised at meeting him than the occasion seemed to warrant.

He was perfectly willing to admit that one might be slightly surprised to meet him sitting on a fallen log at the side of the road so far from the village. Still the doctor must know that the Palace Hotel could hardly be supposed to offer many diversions. And surely there was nothing extraordinary in a young and active man's choosing to walk a dozen miles or so into the country. That the doctor had supposed him to have returned to New York with the others never entered his head for a moment.

And yet this was the fact. Merrick, it will be remembered, had come to his determination to stay behind in Great Falls while the doctor was busily occupied with the care of Mrs. Horton. Only Sadie and Horace Worth had originally known of his decision. Later on, when he had announced his purpose to Mary, the doctor and Hilda were with her mother upstairs. And, in his interest in trying to persuade Polly to stay behind with Hilda, he had forgotten Merrick entirely, or supposed him to be waiting in the machine with Joe and Willy. The fact that he had spent several days of the past week over at Coopersville, conferring with some of the directors of the proposed hospital,

explained why he and Merrick had never met on the street, or why he had not heard the important item of news, from the village point of view, of the rich young city man who was staying at the Palace, and whose business no one could find out. The fact of his wealth had been established by the gossips at the bar beyond the peradventure of doubt. Jeff. Lewis, the bartender-clerk, was the authority for the statement that he had actually taken a room without asking the price of board. What further evidence could one ask?

The doctor and his horse had alike been in a brown study from which Merrick unintentionally startled them. The old horse had been jogging along at the gait which seemed appropriate when one was not sure whether one was headed for home and a comfortable meal in one's stall, or merely on the way to visit another patient.

Probably the revery into which he had fallen had been connected with his far-off coltish days. Certainly, the start and snort which he gave when he came upon Merrick seated by the side of the road was quite out of keeping with his usual dignified deportment, more what one would expect from a skittish colt given to shying and other youthful foolishness.

His unusual action had roused the doctor

from the maze of thoughts in which he had lost himself. In his case, too, the thoughts were connected with the springtime of life. With a muttered exclamation, he had given the reins a sharp tug, a performance which made old Jim prance with indignation and astonishment.

"Great heavens, Merrick! Where in the world did you drop from?" His tone was sharper than he intended.

"From Belleville," said Merrick dryly. And he added, in a tone even more dry: "Sorry to have given you both such a fright. I had never before realized what a terrifying figure I must be!"

"Nonsense," returned the doctor a shade more cordially. "We were both asleep, Jim and I, I guess. Won't you jump in? That is, if you are going my way."

"I don't know what your way is," Merrick reminded him.

"Back to Great Falls, of course."

"Well then, I will, thanks. I'm staying at the Palace, you know. Not that I feel any strong desire to return to it. But I must go back some time, and I confess that my walk has given me something of an appetite."

The doctor gave a little shrug. "Knowing the reputation that the table at the Palace has emboldens me to suggest that you come

and take pot-luck with me at my humble home. There are a good many ladies at Great Falls who would probably think that, given the choice, they would prefer to risk their lives at the hotel. You see I am the titular head of a strictly bachelor establishment. Women are taboo, as far as having anything to do with my domestic arrangements is concerned."

"That sounds good to me," laughed Merrick. "I used to do for myself for months at a time up in Canada, and I quite got to like it. But I shouldn't have supposed that you could have found the time for it."

"Oh, no. I have neither the time nor the necessary skill. You remember I was careful to claim to be only the titular head of my house. Solomon, an elderly colored man, really runs the place—and me. He gives me what he pretends to think I ought to eat. In reality, he gives me what he himself likes. He is the real master. The only stipulation that I insist on making is that there shall always be enough for at least one other, in case I should be so fortunate as to have a guest." The doctor finished with a courteous bow.

"It is very good of you, I'm sure," returned Merrick cordially, "and I assure you, I accept with pleasure. But tell me, didn't you really know that I had been staying on here? I didn't go back with the others. I should have thought

from the small number of regular guests at the Palace just now, that the addition of even so humble a person as myself would have been an event of more importance."

"Probably I am the only person in the place that did not know of it," admitted Doctor Simpson. "But I have been away for a day or two, and since my return I haven't been downtown further than Mrs. Horton's. She must have forgotten to tell me about it."

"I'm glad to hear that," laughed Merrick. "To learn that she knew of it, would have upset one of my most cherished theories."

He didn't explain this remark, and the doctor asked no questions.

As they jogged along Main Street by the Palace Hotel, Merrick heard his name called in a drawling voice, which could belong to no one but Archie, the messenger. The doctor, having persuaded Jim to stop—a more difficult matter than usual, Jim having come to the conclusion that he was at last bound for home—the owner of the drawling voice proceeded to make his leisurely way out into the middle of the street. In his hand he held a note addressed to Merrick in an unfamiliar hand. Although he had never seen Mary's writing, he instinctively knew it was not hers.

"She said to give you this as soon as I see you," explained Archie.

"All right," said Merrick. "Much obliged.

"You'll excuse me," he said to his companion. "It may be important. I think Mrs. Horton has at last heard that I am here." Again he gave his pleased, boyish laugh.

With a nod of his head, the doctor chirped to Jim, who required no further urging to resume his homeward way. Merrick was right in his surmise. The note *was* from Mrs. Horton.

"My dear Mr. Merrick," she wrote. "I cannot tell you how surprised I am to hear that you are still in Great Falls, and that you have been thoughtful enough to send to inquire for me, not once, but several times. You must think me very remiss not to have acknowledged your kindness before. I can only assure you, in my own defense, that this is the first time that I have personally received your message. This is the first morning that I have been downstairs, and I happened to open the door for Archie myself. I wonder if you would care to come over Sunday evening for tea with me. That is, if you are going to remain in our little town a few days longer. We would all be glad to see you. You know, perhaps, that Hilda Newton is staying with Mary and me. We always have tea at half-past six. I think, to punish the girls for their carelessness in not letting me know you were here, I shall not let

them know anything about your coming. You see I am taking it for granted that you are going to give me the pleasure of your company. Old people are so set up with a little attention from the young! That must be my excuse for doing so."

That was all; except the signature: "Your sincere friend, Martha Horton." He read it through once again. Then, on a sudden impulse, he handed it to Doctor Simpson.

The doctor took it without comment, and read it slowly, handing Merrick the reins as a matter of form. When he returned it, his face was lighted by a cordial and approving smile.

"You know there isn't a person of my acquaintance whose judgment I rely on as much as I do on that old lady's. And since she——" He stopped in sudden embarrassment.

"Since she approves of my staying here," finished Merrick.

"Exactly. But I suppose you think it none of my business."

"I didn't; until I remembered that you are such an old friend of the family, and about the only man that Mary could ever go to for counsel and advice. Then I, too, have made the discovery that Mrs. Horton is an unusually wise woman. We had a long talk alone together the evening Worth made such an egregious ass of

himself, and I'm being kind to him when I limit myself to saying that!"

"You're certainly not overstating it," said the doctor dryly. "I always knew that Horace Worth was one of the sect of the Pharisees, but I *did* use to give him credit for being sincere according to his lights. I find myself doubting that now."

Merrick's lip curled. "After dinner, if you have a little time to spare me, I intend telling you what my motives are for staying." And he added, a little defiantly: "I knew that was really why you asked me."

"I am not denying that that was part of my reason. I certainly would have taken the liberty—on the ground of my old friendship for the family, and because I am the nearest thing to any men-folks Mary and her mother have—to have asked that very question. Thank you for meeting me more than half-way."

The doctor's grasp on the reins tightened. He had resumed the control of them on finishing Mrs. Horton's letter. With a sharp turn, Jim dashed through an open gate, up a driveway that led to the door of a pleasant old-fashioned house; much larger, somehow, than Merrick had expected to find. They had turned so sharply that Merrick's hand had involuntarily clutched the side of the seat to keep from being thrown out of the buggy.

"Does Jim always take the turn like that?" he asked, with a smile.

"Always," the doctor assured him gravely. "I think he hopes to catch me off my guard and upset me some day!"

"Solomon!" he called.

CHAPTER XV

They had had a good frank, man-to-man talk after a most excellent dinner. Indeed Merrick had felt called upon to apologize more than once for his appetite, explaining that it had been days since he had seen anything like real food; thereby, as the doctor told him later over their pipes in the study, making a devoted friend for life of the dignified Solomon.

Beginning with the account of how he had worked his way from abject poverty to wealth, Merrick had frankly told the history of his acquaintance with Mary. He made no secret of the fact that his first pursuit of her had been founded on a misapprehension of her circumstances and character.

He admitted that the object he had had in first coming to Great Falls had been to entice her back to New York. Up to the evening of his arrival, the thought of offering her marriage had never entered his head.

He offered nothing in his own defense save the fact that he had tried, by every argument that occurred to him, to persuade her *not* to join the party the night that Horace Worth had arrived to fetch her to what was supposed to

be her mother's death-bed. He told of trying to persuade her to let him stake her to a ticket home. The doctor readily accepted his statement that there had been no sinister purpose underlying his offer.

It was not an easy story to tell. Merrick was well aware that he was treading on delicate ground when he spoke of the environment in which he had found her. Anything that he said on that head was naturally a reflection on Hilda. And that his hearer was deeply interested in Hilda, with an interest which the fact that they had known each other since childhood could not fully explain, he perfectly understood. Still, it had to be done, in justice to both himself and his cause. He acquitted himself of his difficult task with so much delicacy, however, that he was conscious of earning the doctor's gratitude. He finished by relating how the first sight of Mary in her own home had aroused scruples which up to that time he had succeeded in smothering. The talk he had had later with her mother had fully opened his eyes to the baseness of his conduct. And, finally, Horace Worth's outrageous behavior had brought him to the realization that his love for Mary was something higher and better than the mere desire for possession founded on baffled desire and ungratified passion. Once convinced of this, he had

hastened to make a tardy atonement by asking her mother's leave to offer her his hand in marriage before them all.

He told how Mary had ultimately refused him. Then for the first time, dropping into a lighter tone, he outlined the plan of campaign he had thought it wise to adopt. He told of the daily report brought from the house as to the progress made by Mrs. Horton on the road to recovery. The doctor agreed with him that the curt messages bore signs of having been inspired by Mary. Certainly they had never emanated from her mother.

The account of how he had walked to the neighboring town to send the order for the flowers, and the invitation from Mrs. Horton, brought the history of his love affair up to date.

Doctor Simpson was never a man of many words. But the fact that at the end of this recital he suggested that Merrick bring his things up from the hotel and take up his abode with him was eloquent of his approval.

"I live, as you see, very simply," he said. "The place is pretty bare. My uncle, who, like myself, was an old bachelor, cared little for pomps and vanities. And I, somehow, have never been able to get up sufficient interest in doing anything more to the old house than keep it in fair repair. Perhaps it will be a

poor exchange for the tawdry glories of the Palace."

"Don't ask me unless you really mean it," Bob warned him. "If you *do* mean it, I'll be here on the jump! Aside from the pleasure that your company will give me, I can't help but feel that coming to stay here with Mary's oldest friend is like taking the outer fort of the citadel. I am doubly grateful to you, therefore."

"I certainly mean it," the doctor assured him.

"I'll be up before night then. I have only a suitcase with me. It was only by accident that I brought it. For years I have had the habit of keeping several bags packed all the time. By a piece of good luck, it was the first thing I caught hold of. Morgan proposed our coming on the spur of the moment." It was stupid of him to have spoken of Willy! He saw the doctor wince before he turned away to the window.

For a half hour longer they talked of indifferent things. Then they separated until tea-time. But, as it chanced, they were destined not to see each other again for several days. At the hotel Merrick found a telegram that had been forwarded from his hotel in New York. It was from one of his Canadian partners. He had taken a sudden notion to run down to New

York for a few days, and had counted on Bob being there to show him around.

Merrick knew what that meant. He gave a little frown of disgust at the thought. But a moment's reflection convinced him that he had better obey the summons. Policy and the claims of an old friendship alike dictated that course.

Besides, he was by no means sure that his cause would not be furthered by an absence of a few days—he promised himself that it should not be longer. Mary would not be able to forget his existence just because he was not present in person. In the first place, there would be the daily reminder of the roses; secondly, the doctor would be seeing her almost every day. And he had an idea that the doctor, now that he was on his side, was an ally on whom one could count. From the dingy writing-room of the hotel, he dispatched two notes. One, a brief explanation to the doctor; the other, a more formal note to Mrs. Horton, explaining that he had been called away for a few days, and expressing the hope that she would renew her kind invitation upon his return.

He caught the night train for New York by the narrowest of margins.

Mary had, as Merrick surmised, been the person to receive Archie on the first of his dip-

lomatic visits. She had smiled with a certain grimness at his paraphrase of his employer's politely worded inquiry as to Mrs. Horton's health. Her reply, if not couched in exactly the language brought back by Archie, had been as curtly brief as his transcription.

She had heard that it was an established convention of a certain stage of love-making to establish oneself well with the elder members of a family. For the moment, while her mother was still confined an unwilling prisoner to her room, she was certainly mistress of the situation. Perhaps by the time she was around again, a certain young man would have abandoned that mode of attack. But it turned out that she underestimated his persistence, although of that she was not quite sure. Archie's visits ceased with a suddenness that left her guessing.

The first time that her mother had been downstairs, she had, herself, forgetting that it was the hour of Archie's arrival, been occupied with some household task on the upper floor. When she remembered it, it was already half an hour past his regular time.

When she came into the sitting-room, her mother was lying back in the deep arm-chair she secretly so objected to. But Mary noticed that someone had been using the little desk in the corner which she had tidied up only the

evening before. And when she went over and pretended to arrange some flowers in a small glass bowl, she noticed that the ink on the pen was still fresh.

So! Her mother had been writing to somebody. It was the most unusual thing in the world for her to write letters; and when she did, she always left them lying on the desk against the time when someone should be going to the post-office. But there was no letter there.

She had, of course, no wish to pry into anyone's affairs, much less her mother's. But it was most unlike her to be secretive about anything. For almost the first time since she had been a small child, she felt something very like irritation against her mother. There was one thing she was resolved upon: not if she were to die for it would she condescend to ask a single question.

But when Hilda came into the room a few moments later, she modified her resolution to the extent of asking Hilda if she had been writing at the desk.

"I?" said Hilda. "No, indeed. Not that I oughtn't to write a dozen letters. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," said Mary evasively. "Only I am getting so absent-minded. And I was almost sure I had straightened up this desk last night."

Mrs. Horton was lying back in her chair with

closed eyes. Both the girls had spoken in low tones, for fear that she might be having a nap. Had either of them happened to glance at her at that moment, they might have noticed that her eyelids flickered slightly, and that there was just a suggestion of twitching about the corners of her mouth. Presently they went out into the dining-room, where they could talk over some dressmaking plans, where they would not disturb her.

Once satisfied that she was alone, Mrs. Horton opened a pair of bright eyes in which there was no trace of drowsiness.

"I'm a deceitful old wretch!" she reproached herself. "But I'm doing it for the best. There! One always says that! But I don't care. I don't intend to let that daughter of mine throw away her happiness just because she is too obstinate to see that it's only her pride that stands between her and happiness. *And,*" she added, with conviction, "I just *know* he's a good man!" But she didn't look in the least contrite, in spite of the hard names she called herself.

It was the next morning but one, that the first of the roses came.

That morning, the sewing-bee began in earnest. There was no longer any question of having to buy materials. If anything, Hilda's trunks furnished them with an embarrassment

of riches. It had been decided to turn the dining-room into a sewing-room. The light was good, and the door of communication with the sitting-room could always be closed in case a neighbor came in to sit with Mrs. Horton.

When the two girls came down, their arms piled high with rainbow-like fabrics, Sadie, who had been clearing away the breakfast things, almost dropped the platter she was carrying into the kitchen. Her face flushed a lovely crimson, her eyes sparkled so that for an instant she looked both young and pretty.

"My land o' goodness! I didn't know there was such lovely things in the world!" was all she could say.

Actuated by her natural generosity, which had nothing to do with the fact that most of her gowns would be entirely unsuitable to the life she was planning for herself, Hilda had already disposed of most of her pretty things in anticipation between Mary and her mother. There was, for example, a gray silk dinner gown, which could easily be made over into a pretty dress for Mrs. Horton. Hilda knew just how she would look in it. And there were any number which would need only a touch—the removing of some of the elaborate trimming, perhaps—to be perfectly suitable for Mary. They were of almost the same size and figure, Hilda being just a little taller and broader in

the shoulders. And now the thought came to her that there was at least one that would be most becoming to Sadie.

"I'm so glad you think them pretty, Sadie. You know I will have use only for the plainest things, mostly white, as I am going to be a nurse, you know."

"You? A nurse! Where, for the land's sake!" exclaimed Sadie, who had heard nothing of the doctor's plan for Hilda.

"In Doctor Simpson's hospital. Didn't you know it?"

"But it's hardly begun."

"Well, you know I'll have a lot to learn. I dare say I shan't be ready as soon as *it* is. And the first thing I've got to do is to make myself some clothes that a nurse can wear. Some of these I couldn't use at all. I've decided just what ones Mary could use, and I've a lovely idea for a new dress for Mrs. Horton—only you mustn't either of you tell her. It's to be a surprise. And there's one here that would make over beautifully for you, Sadie. You're not quite so tall as I, but you're a little stouter. There'd be no trouble about it at all. Maybe you don't know what fine dressmakers Mary and I are when we put our heads together!"

This time Sadie's flush was not so becoming. Her eyes shone with a troubled light. She

made a gesture of protest, nearly coming to grief with the platter once again as she did so.

"Oh, but I couldn't do it! I never could pay for such things if I lived to be a hundred years old! Besides"—she stammered in horrible embarrassment—"ain't they—ain't they the—the wages——"

"Sadie!" cried Mary indignantly.

"The wages of sin!" finished poor Hilda. "I suppose they are. I never thought of that!"

Bursting into tears, Sadie rushed from the room.

For the life of her, Mary could think of no words of comfort. She was convinced that Sadie had not meant to wound her friend by her cruel speech. But that was the way she felt about it, and Sadie always came bluntly out with her thoughts.

Once before she, herself, had gone away from home, and found how hard the world was, before she had known temptation, and had so nearly yielded to it, she might have felt as Sadie did. She would have been incapable of giving her thoughts words in the manner Sadie had done, however. But now, her feeling had changed. "Wages of sin" Hilda's things might be. But they had been paid for, and only Hilda could have told how high the price had been.

As always throughout her whole life when she did not know what to do, she turned instinctively to her mother for counsel. Slipping softly out of the room, she went in search of her. It took only a few minutes to explain the situation that had arisen.

When she returned a few minutes later with her mother, it was to find Hilda, with the old haggard look which she knew so well, and which her face had not worn since a few days after her return to her old home, with her arms once more filled with clothes. She was about to carry them back to her trunk. Closing the door, Mary left the two women alone together.

What passed between them Mary never knew. But a short while after, when she had seen her mother go into the kitchen where Sadie, her eyes looking like boiled gooseberries, was assaulting the weekly wash, she took the opportunity to run down to the village to attend to some necessary errands.

When she returned an hour later, it was to find her mother standing in the middle of the dining-room with Hilda circling about her on her knees, her mouth full of pins, fitting the gray skirt, while Sadie was industriously ripping the bodice seated very erect in her chair.

"Well!" said Mary gayly. "It looks as if

it was up to me to get dinner—that is, if we are to have any dinner. Not that I see any signs of it!"

And with a heart greatly lightened, she went out into the kitchen.

CHAPTER XVI

It was over two weeks before Bob Merrick saw Great Falls again. After he had discharged his duties as guide to his visiting friend—a task which a month before he would not have believed could ever have seemed so distasteful and utterly boring—he had found it necessary to pay a flying visit to Montreal on a matter of business, which kept him stewing impatiently for several days.

He had duly notified the doctor of his change of plan, and had received a general report of the state of affairs which did much to soothe his perturbed spirits. Everyone was in the best of spirits and health—at least superficially. But Mrs. Horton had taken the writer aside on one of his daily visits to confide to him that she was a little anxious about Mary, whose appetite seemed to be failing under the first heat of summer.

Also, her mother imagined that her naturally high spirits were not quite as spontaneous as usual. She had a suspicion that Mary was forcing them just a little. There was no reason that Mary should not be her old cheerful self. There was not a thing in the world just

now to cause her anxiety. Mrs. Horton, herself, as the doctor agreed, seemed better than she had been for several years past.

Of course it might be that the old question of finding some way to earn a little money, more urgent than ever now that they were in debt, was the real secret of her trouble. But now that Hilda was with them, and contributing so generously to the family exchequer, the immediate cause of worry was certainly no greater than it had been. And during the summer their expenses were always less, owing to Sadie's unquestioned talent as a gardener. What that girl managed to do with their small garden was really quite wonderful!

Did the doctor think that some simple tonic might be a good thing? Mrs. Horton, like all country women, had a head full of old-fashioned remedies which, according to tradition, were nothing short of infallible for any of the ills that flesh was heir to. Still she never employed them without first consulting Doctor Simpson.

The doctor had promised to take the case under advisement, as it were. Then, with a seeming irrelevancy quite foreign to his habit, he had added that he expected Merrick back almost any day, adding that, to his very great pleasure, he had persuaded that companionable young man to finish his stay at Great Falls at his house.

The doctor had casually mentioned that Mrs. Horton was quite right to boast of her garden. The house fairly bloomed with the most beautiful roses. But when he had expressed his admiration of them to Mary, and mentioned that later in the season he intended to beg a slip from the bush that bore them, she had not responded with the generous alacrity that her friend felt he had every right to expect.

After re-reading this letter several times, Merrick concluded that Fate had not played him as scurvy a trick in upsetting his schedule as he had at first supposed. His earlier opinion that Doctor Simpson was a Prince of Good Fellows was confirmed, never to be changed again during his life.

His visit to New York had confirmed him in another opinion. The life that he had led there was over and done with forever. How it could ever have possessed any attraction for him was beyond his comprehension. He had, as far as possible, avoided the haunts where he thought it probable that he might encounter Willy Morgan and his crowd. He did not feel the slightest desire ever to see either Willy or Joe again. But he did have a desire to see Polly.

Of course the news that had come to Hilda had not reached him. Therefore he had known nothing of the departure of Polly and Joe for

Europe. He had carefully timed his call at Polly's apartment at an hour when Garfield was sure to be down in the city.

But, of course, he found that the apartment had been given up. He never questioned the truth of the statement. The hallboy, who was his informant, had too good reason to recall his visitor as the bestower of numerous generous tips during the past winter to have any object in deceiving him. The thought that Joe would ever buy him over his head was too absurd to be entertained. Besides what could be his motive for doing such violence to all his natural instincts for thrift?

During the few leisure hours that he had had while away, which he could give to serious thought, he had gone over in his mind the details of a project which had been suggested by the doctor's interest in his new hospital.

Although Merrick knew little of the cost of building and equipping hospitals, he made up his mind that at the first opportunity he would collect all the information that he could on the subject. What better use could he possibly find for his money than helping to provide this refuge for sick and crippled children. He foresaw that he might meet with some opposition from his friend. But none, he thought, that he could not find some means of overcoming.

His immediate business in Montreal con-

cluded, he lingered several days longer in order to discuss the matter with an old friend, an architect, who had for many years made a specialty of hospitals. Armed with numerous pamphlets and booklets on the subject, as well as a large amount of data furnished by his friend, he turned his face towards Great Falls, feeling that he was at least qualifying to talk intelligently on the subject.

The doctor was unfeignedly glad to see him upon his return at tea-time. Merrick, who had arrived shortly after he had started for a round of visits in the early afternoon, had availed himself of the doctor's invitation to make himself perfectly at home. Solomon, who was not unmindful of the compliments which the guest had paid his culinary skill, received him with a dignified cordiality, and busied himself unpacking the several gladstone-bags which Merrick had brought with him. This time he was prepared to stay until he either attained his heart's desire, or was convinced that his was a hopeless cause.

He acknowledged to himself that he would require a deal of convincing. From what the doctor had said, as well as from what he had implied in his letter, he felt assured that he had a strong partisan in the person of Mrs. Horton. He thought he could also reckon on Hilda. The doctor was certainly with him, heart and

soul. In short, it seemed that Mary stood alone. And he was vain enough to believe that it was only her pride which had to be conquered. After tea, the two men went out onto the long veranda with their pipes. Not wishing to seem selfishly absorbed in his own affairs, Merrick at once opened up the subject of the hospital. His mind, trained in business affairs, was quick to master the salient points of a subject, once he gave it his undivided attention. He also possessed a natural faculty for grasping details. The doctor was both astonished and pleased to find how intelligently he treated the whole matter.

In return he confided to his guest his disappointment over the slow and limited response his appeals had met with from the moneyed people in the country around to whom he had gone with such enthusiastic confidence. He had been compelled to cut his original estimates in half more than once, and to see the modern, up-to-date institution which had so long been his one castle in the air gradually sink to proportions which could only be described as modest in the extreme.

"Still it was a beginning," he admitted, with a sigh.

It took no little skill on his friend's part to drag from him the fact that he, himself, had subscribed nearly three-quarters of the

amount raised. Merrick determined in his own mind that such a thing was not to be permitted. But he wisely forebore touching on the subject just yet. Having mentioned that he knew a man in Montreal who specialized on hospitals, and whom he knew could be gotten to do the work at an unusually reasonable figure, he brought the conversation round to the Horton house and its inmates.

All was going well with them apparently. Mrs. Horton was recovering her health in a manner to set at defiance all proper medical theories. The girls seemed happy and busy. Hilda's coming, whatever problems it might cause later, had solved one very important one for the present at least; that of Sadie's remaining a member of the household. And as to Sadie's value, the doctor was glad to bear witness—her only fault being the sharpness of her tongue.

Hilda was surprising them all. After being away so long, it was remarkable how easily she adapted herself to conditions which must have had almost the effect of complete novelty. One feared that after the—here the doctor hesitated a moment—gayety and excitement of the life she had known in the city, she would have had moments of restlessness and boredom. But of that she had given no faintest sign. Indeed she looked in better health—more like the

Hilda they had all known as a girl, than Merrick would believe. Mary, who, of course, had seen a good deal of her in New York, had commented on the change for the better.

"I am not surprised," said Merrick. "From the first time I ever saw Hilda, I knew that she was tragically unhappy. It is a mistake to think that gayety and excitement can content a woman like Hilda for long. I know now that this is the life she was really meant for. This is what she was secretly longing to return to."

"She left of her own choice," said the doctor, in a low voice.

"That may all be. But she must have been very young, hardly more than a child. And then, too, I, for one, have no means of knowing what choice was offered her. But what of it? That does not prove that she did not long with all her heart to come back. A man is allowed that chance in this world. Why not allow a woman the same opportunity?"

"It is the law of life," said the doctor stubbornly.

"Oh, my dear friend!" said Merrick, with a trace of something like irritation, "you only mean that it is the law which men have made, and to which women have unwillingly subscribed."

"I know many women who would agree with me."

"Naturally; the women who have led such sheltered and protected lives that they know nothing of temptation. I admit that I have only changed my viewpoint in the last few months. But I have changed it for all time."

"I wonder," mused the doctor. "After all, there is only one test. I wonder if you would stand that."

"That being?"

The doctor paced the length of the veranda for a moment or two in silence.

"Would you be willing to marry any woman with a past like Hilda's?" he said, coming back and standing before Merrick, a stern, erect figure in the soft light of the summer evening.

"If I loved her, I honestly think I would," said Merrick earnestly.

"Then you do not hold with the theory that your children have a right to demand an honest mother?"

"I don't think they have a right to 'demand,' as you put it, an honest mother any more than an honest father, unless on the ground that they have a right to expect *one* honest parent. Heaven knows, their chances of an honest mother average higher than the chances of an honest father! I am naturally assuming that by 'honest' you mean chaste."

"All I can say is that most men would not agree with you."

"Probably not. But I have never cared what most men thought, after I have made up my own mind on a subject."

"Well," said the doctor, "you have given me something to think about. I think I'll turn in, if you don't mind. I have had a rather tiring day. I had intended suggesting that we stroll down to see our friends in the village, but I fear we'd only find them all in bed. We country-folk, you know, are early abed. Good-night to you."

He held out his strong hand. Merrick grasped it warmly.

"Good-night," he said heartily. "I think I'll sit up a bit longer. This air is wonderful, after a night in a stuffy sleeper."

The next morning, at Merrick's suggestion, they drove over to the site of the proposed hospital, the foundations of which were roughly outlined. They had a busy morning, what with making estimates and calculations. The doctor found fresh astonishment in Merrick's information on the subject. He little knew how recently it had been acquired. Indeed his friend had spent some hours in his room poring over the various papers submitted to him by his Montreal acquaintance.

They returned in time for the noonday dinner, with appetites which enabled them both to do full justice to the good things which Solo-

mon had provided. In the afternoon, Merrick accompanied the doctor on a round of visits, acting, as he expressed it, as a sort of human hitching post.

As they drove past Mrs. Horton's house, Sadie was busily hanging out the clothes. She was not too much occupied, however, to take careful note of any passersby. Trust Sadie for that!

It is to be feared that the last of the clothes were not hung with Sadie's usual care. She was too anxious to get back into the house for that. On the way back to the kichen, she stopped to put her head in the dining-room door. Mary and Hilda were busily at work, Mrs. Horton, in the meantime, reading aloud from one of the magazines which the doctor had brought her on a recent visit.

"Who do you think just drove by?" demanded Sadie.

"I'm sure I don't know. Who?" asked Mrs. Horton. It would never do not to appear to take interest in Sadie's news.

"Doctor Simpson and that Merrick man!" announced Sadie explosively.

"I'm real glad those two are getting to know each other," commented Mrs. Horton. "They're sure to get to be great friends; two such fine men!"

"I shouldn't think they'd have much in common," said Mary a trifle sharply.

Hilda and Mrs. Horton exchanged glances, but neither one of them spoke. It was not long before Mary made an excuse to leave the room.

They were all against her, she realized that. It was perhaps not so surprising in her mother. Her dear, innocent, unworldly mother, who never could be brought to understand that all the world was not more good than bad. But she *was* surprised at Hilda. Hilda knew how far had been any thought of offering her marriage from his mind in the beginning. Had not he, himself, confessed that he had come up along with the rest with the sole object of luring her back to the fate she had so narrowly escaped?

That in itself showed how honest he had been in his efforts to persuade her against going out with the rest of them that night. She recalled the way he had talked to her as if she had been a naughty child! He was shrewd enough to know that he could not have used a better means to influence her to go with them.

And from things that Willy had dropped, she understood that all of them—Polly and Hilda no doubt unwillingly—had, in a sense, been party to the plan. Certainly, it had been no secret. Polly and Joe had had a bet on it! And yet, she admitted to herself that she had

forgiven Polly and Hilda. But she had not forgiven him.

What if he had asked her to marry him finally? A man's sense of honor was not always easy to understand. Certainly there did not seem to be a universally accepted standard. She could not imagine Willy and Joe having the same standards as—as the doctor, for example.

And then there was Horace Worth. He, too, pretended to act from only the highest sense of honor. And yet there wasn't a man of her acquaintance who would have acted as Horace had done. His offer of marriage had only meant that according to *his* standard of honor he was bound to repair the fact that through *him* she was in danger of being compromised. Her feelings were of no importance. He was, in the end, doing what was right. And he was surprised at her ingratitude in not accepting him!

Even as she entertained this thought, Mary admitted that she was a little unfair. The question that she fought against answering even to herself was: Would she have accepted him in other circumstances? Did she, in other words, care for him sufficiently to marry him if they had met as lovers ordinarily do? In short, did she love Robert Merrick as a wife should love her husband? No! She was not

ready to answer that question yet. The nearest she would permit herself to come to it was the admission that *even if she were to grow to love him,* she would never marry him, because she could never be sure that his offer had not been made solely out of pity. She would never take such an advantage of a man, *no matter how much she loved him,* as to accept an offer which was the result of a generous impulse.

After making these rather significant admissions, Mary softly closed the door of her bedroom in which she had taken refuge. Taking a key from the drawer of her bureau, she unlocked the large drawer underneath an old wardrobe which nearly filled one side of the room.

As she pulled it out, the room was filled with a faint aromatic odor. The drawer was half full of faded roses. Curiously enough, they were all of the same variety. For a moment her fingers lingered caressingly among them. Then she closed and locked the drawer, and restored the key to its hiding-place.

It wouldn't be fair to say what she did next. But before she returned to the dining-room, she found it necessary to bathe her eyes.

Sewing is apt to be very hard on the eyes unless they are unusually strong!

CHAPTER XVII

The history of Great Falls and its people would hardly be complete did not the historian pause to record the sensation that Hilda Newton's return to its precincts caused in the breasts of many of its inhabitants.

To the men of the village her arrival was a matter of superficial interest. A subject to be discussed, and perhaps laughed over of an evening in the post-office, which was also the principal store.

But to the women it was a topic which only gathered interest as the days went by. What had she come back for? How long was she going to stay? Was it true that she had come with a party of her associates in an automobile of the most gorgeous description, and been left behind against her will? And—most absorbing question of all—what was Mrs. Horton thinking of to take her into her house? A nice companion Hilda Newton was for a mere slip of a girl like Mary Horton! And Mrs. Horton had always been so particular about Mary.

Not that anybody knew anything about Hilda really, beyond the fact that years before she had run away to the city on the same train

with a "drummer" with whom she had somehow struck up an acquaintance. That she had actually gone *with* him was more of a matter of surmise than knowledge.

But Joe Powell, who had been a conductor on the road for years, and who lived the next station but one down the line, had told his wife, who had told her cousin, Mrs. Austin, who lived at Great Falls, that Hilda and the drummer had talked in the most friendly fashion and shared the same seat as far as the end of the division. That had been enough to give foundation for the theory that they had gone together.

Although from time to time as the years passed more than one of the natives had seen Hilda in New York, as has already been related, there was no one who had ever seen her with the drummer after Joe Powell had reluctantly left the train. Although Sam Loveridge—Great Falls recalled that this was the drummer's name—had long since ceased to pay Great Falls a semi-annual visit, he had been too well-known a figure at the Palace bar for anyone not to know him tolerably well by description. And none of the men with whom she had been seen in the various restaurants and theaters where Great Falls ran across her had remotely resembled Sam.

After all, that was a comparatively unim-

portant matter. The important thing was that Hilda had always been far too well dressed to be forgiven. If feminine Great Falls had had the courage of its convictions—which, of course, it had not—it would have announced, as a truism, that virtue and dowdiness always went together. Hilda's best friend could never have accused her of being dowdy. The inference was plain.

There were other lesser sins to be laid at her door. Who in Great Falls had ever heard a word from her since her departure? That argued ingratitude. Just what Hilda had to be grateful for was beside the question. Then, too, it was currently reported that she never recognized her old acquaintances unless absolutely forced to do so by meeting them face to face. That they usually looked in another direction when they caught her eye did not alter the fact that she should have shown pleasure in seeing them.

Altogether, the case against her was pretty black. The mere fact that no one *knew* anything only made it blacker. If her conduct was all that it should be, there would have been no mystery. People who were mysterious had something to hide.

But *did* no one know anything about her? If Great Falls—the feminine portion—could have been sure of that, it might have been more con-

tented. Hilda's return would have been discussed for a while and then the topic would have been exhausted. But it must be admitted that it was little short of maddening to think that there were possibly several persons who knew much more than they could be persuaded to tell.

First, there was Doctor Simpson. There was no doubt that he had been deeply in love with Hilda in the old days. Why had he not gone to the city and brought her back, once his uncle's death had made him independent? If he had fallen in love with someone else, that would have been different. But the doctor was still a bachelor, and regarded as a hopeless case. There was no doubt that the doctor knew something. But he wasn't the sort of person of whom one asked personal questions.

Secondly, there was Horace Worth. Everybody knew that Horace had volunteered to go to the city to bring Mary Horton back when her mother was so desperately ill. In some vague way the rumor had gotten about that Horace had seen Hilda either at that time or at some earlier visit. There were any number of people who had heard that much secondhand. But somehow no one knew the person who had had it from Horace. There were several people who wouldn't have minded asking Horace directly, the least in the world. Only,

unfortunately, Horace had had a sort of nervous breakdown from overwork, and had gone away before anyone knew of Hilda's return.

Three people remained. Mary Horton, her mother, and Sadie. Not that Sadie would necessarily know much. But she was an intelligent girl, and she was on the spot. She must be able to form some judgment of Hilda from her conversation and from seeing her every day.

Mrs. Horton was rather of a forlorn hope. Not that anyone would have been afraid to ask gentle, old Mrs. Horton almost anything. But, in the first place, she was such a simple old soul that she would believe anything that anyone told her. And Hilda would hardly be fool enough to give herself away to a person she came to visit. Besides, without being exactly indirect, the old lady had an extraordinary way of answering a question without telling one anything. And the worst of it was that one never realized it until one came to repeat her replies! Of course she didn't mean it. Nevertheless, it couldn't have been more exasperating if she had.

In the end, the choice seemed to narrow itself down to Mary. She had only to appear on the village street on some necessary errand for a day or two after Hilda's advent, and it seemed as if all Great Falls had been minded

to fare forth at the same time. Old Mrs. Crawford, who was enormously stout, and therefore somewhat slow of locomotion, actually kept her bonnet hanging in the bay-window for nearly a week so as to be able to intercept Mary before she got too far past the house.

Consciously, or unconsciously, Mary seemed to have inherited something of her mother's uncanny knack of dodging the point at issue, and of doing it in so pleasant and agreeable a manner—Mary had a particularly charming way with her elders—that one never realized until later that one had learned nothing!

At the sewing society which met at Mrs. Jepson's the Saturday after Hilda's return, the sum total of the accumulated knowledge concerning her was, so to speak, laid on the table.

What did it all amount to? This! Hilda Newton was visiting Mrs. Horton. No one knew how long she was going to stay, but they hoped to keep her for the rest of the summer. It was a sort of return visit for one Mary had paid her in New York. No, Mary hadn't gone there at first. Hilda had found where she was staying and had come to see her and asked her then. Yes, Hilda lived very comfortably. She shared an apartment with a woman friend. No, she was not married. A little later, Hilda would, without doubt, be glad to see her old friends. For the time being, they were all liv-

ing very quietly. The doctor had cautioned Mrs. Horton against seeing many people just yet. Oh, yes; the doctor saw Hilda most every day when he came to see Mary's mother. They seemed to be on the most friendly terms. Why not?

A sort of heel-tap was contributed by one daring member of the society, who had tackled Sadie. From the point of view of importance, it amounted to nothing. As a testimony of the narrator's courage, it was eloquent.

To the question as to whether Hilda Newton was paying board, Sadie had replied that nobody was paying *her* anything. She had thought that the whole town knew that she worked for her keep. If they didn't, they were welcome to know it now.

The attendance at this meeting of the sewing society had been notably large. The following week, it relapsed to subnormal.

Mary had, of course, reported the inquisition she had been subjected to. At the next family council—the doctor had been elected a member by acclamation—it was voted that Hilda must show herself in public as soon as she had provided herself with a new wardrobe.

She, herself, had seemed positively frightened at the thought. But she was too sensible not to see that her friends were right. She could not keep in hiding forever. To do so,

would only be to give form and substance to the vague accusations against her. She made the one stipulation, that she need not go out—for the present, at least—without either Mary or Sadie acting as a bodyguard. This was acceded to.

One of the pleasantest things that had happened to Hilda for a long time was Sadie's complete adoption of her cause. It was not always easy to tell from just what motives Sadie acted. Probably she would have found it difficult to explain her sudden change of base to herself. But in a moment of unusual expansiveness she had confided to Mary that "she didn't care a snap what folks had to say about Hilda Newton. She only wished that she had half her spunk!" As no one had ever accused Sadie of lacking this useful attribute, it was, without doubt, as high a compliment as she could have paid anyone.

And so, at last, things seemed to be coming Hilda's way. Everyone, the doctor included, seemed to wish to help her, not only to live a more worthy life, but to forget all that was to be regretted in the past. Twenty times a day she told herself that she would be the greatest ingrate on earth if she did not repay fourfold their interest and affection.

If only she could crush out forever that old-new hope which persisted in flowering in her

heart! It was hard to see *him,* as she did every day, and not hope that some day that elder-brother care and tenderness which he showed for her might change for something else that she longed for.

It was in vain that she reminded herself that he had practically told her that the old love could never be renewed. It was in vain that she flagellated herself with the thought that it was she who had killed it. It was all of no use. The next time she saw him, her hungry eyes scanned his face for any sign of the hoped-for change.

She never dreamed that he, too, was going through a period of storm and stress on her account. He had thought that he had fought it out once and for all time long ago, when he had returned to find her gone. But this seeing her every day showed him his mistake. It was this renewal of the old struggle that had prompted his speech to Merrick the night of his return. How his heart had leapt at his friend's words. But his head was unconvinced. And to a man of Doctor Simpson's nature it is necessary that head and heart should be in perfect accord. And so, by reason of the heart-ache which, unknowingly, they shared in common, they often found it difficult to keep up the casual manner which he had initiated between them.

On one ground they were always able to meet simply and sympathetically. Their interest in the progress of Merrick's wooing never slackened. And, as was only natural, they were outrageously partisan. He, of course, siding with Mary, and she defending Robert Merrick. But on one point they agreed. No stone must be left unturned to bring these obstinate young people together. The great question was how to accomplish it.

CHAPTER XVIII

Mrs. Horton's second invitation to tea reached Merrick by word of mouth. It was the doctor who brought it this time, and this time it was not for Sunday, but for the following day. He welcomed this as a good omen, and, being in love, he was peculiarly open to superstitions, at least so he confessed to the doctor.

As a matter of fact, his chief reason for rejoicing was that it was only a comparatively short time to wait. And Sunday being the day he had looked to receive it, he was so much the gainer, Sunday being still five days off. It was now over three weeks since he had seen Mary. To be sure, a large part of that time he had been away. Still, she had known of his being at the hotel, and she now knew that he was staying with Doctor Simpson. But never, as far as he was aware, had she given any sign of knowing of his presence.

"She shall certainly pay me for this later on!" He shook a threatening finger in the direction of the Horton house. But in his own heart, he knew that he liked what he was pleased to call her "grit."

Something had to be done to make those in-

terminable hours pass that intervened between him and the meeting with his hard-hearted lady-love. The doctor being occupied with the preparation of a paper to be read before the County Medical Society, Merrick drove over to the hospital site and devoted his energies to taking fresh measurements, and checking off the estimates he had made on an earlier visit.

That evening he took up the subject of the hospital finances in dead earnest. He found the doctor curiously reluctant to his putting anything more than a nominal sum into the enterprise. Just why, he was not sure. He did him the justice to understand that his objections arose from no jealous feeling that he, himself, desired whatever credit or glory would arise from carrying the scheme through alone. Nor did he think for a moment that the sincerity of his own interest in the project was questioned. Finally he hit upon what he was convinced was the true solution of his opposition.

It was exactly the same feeling that actuated Mary in refusing to marry him; a sort of jealous pride that took fire at the thought of being helped out of pity.

"Well of all the stiff-necked, obstinate, given-over-to-sinful-pride people I ever struck, this community takes the cake!" he stormed.

"I haven't a doubt but you're all alike. It must be in the air, or perhaps in the water you drink! I only know three of your people tolerably well, but it's exactly the same thing in each case. Mrs. Horton won't hear of letting your bill run on a minute longer than she can possibly help. Why? She's afraid of being an object of charity! Mary won't do me the honor of becoming my wife! Why? Afraid I'm marrying her out of charity! And now you won't let me help with your darned old hospital. Why? For the same silly reason!"

The doctor grinned a little sheepishly.

"I'd be glad of your help, you know that. But I don't just see why you should shoulder the whole thing. It's the people who live here who ought to do that."

"How do you know I'm not going to live here for the rest of my days? I'm certainly going to stay here until Mary changes her mind. I've begun to think that she *may* do so when I am incapacitated through old age. That is, if I can bring myself to consent to be married out of pity! By the time that day comes I shall have probably imbibed enough of the local spirit to refuse!" he added, with an angry laugh.

Before bedtime he had won the doctor's consent to telegraphing for the Montreal architect to come at the earliest possible date to

look over the ground. With that concession, he had to be satisfied.

There was something delightfully homelike about the little old-fashioned sitting-room as the two young men came into it the night of the tea-party. The doctor felt, as he always did when he came into it, that little contraction of the heart when he compared it with his own bachelor abode. How cheerless it was by comparison! Men were poor creatures. They could earn money and build themselves palaces; but only a woman could make a home.

Mrs. Horton received them in great state. She was sitting, very upright, in the straightest chair she could find, the arm-chair and all such outward and visible signs of invalidism being sternly banished. She was wearing her new gray silk. Merrick thought, with one exception, he had never seen a sweeter picture.

It may be surmised that Mary was the exception. She, too, as well as Hilda, wore a new gown for this gala occasion, which was ostensibly in honor of Mrs. Horton's complete restoration to health. But Merrick, being a man, and in love, only noticed that she was wearing one of his roses in her hair. Her manner to him was sweet and gracious. But he could not flatter himself that it was lover-like.

Hilda greeted the doctor with a sort of shy dignity. He had never seen her so beautiful.

The change that these few weeks had wrought in her was more than physical; but being a physician, he noted that first. The worn look had gone, and with it a certain hardness. Her pallor—Hilda rarely had any color—was the warm white of the camellia. But it was in her splendid eyes, glowing with a new serenity, that one read the inward change that had taken place.

He recalled Merrick's words, as he looked at her. And for the first time he felt that perhaps he was wrong after all. This was the Hilda that he had known and loved as a youth. Life had restored her to him. Why not bury the other Hilda with the past!

As was inevitable, they began supper under a little constraint. Even Mrs. Horton's tact could not entirely dispel that. For three of them, at least, there was the reminder of the last time they had broken bread in that same room. Hilda blessed Mrs. Horton anew in her heart for not having given the doctor the place which Willy had occupied on that other occasion. He had started to take it, but, on the pretext of wishing to ask him something, she had had him sit by her.

As they took their places, Hilda and Mary exchanged a meaning glance. And that glance meant: "How I wish that dear, little Polly were here!"

The supper seemed even more delicious than the one Merrick so well remembered. But when he went to compliment his hostess, she disclaimed all the credit. She was about to give up all cooking, it appeared. She didn't propose to enter, at her time of life, into competition with such cooks as Hilda and Sadie! It was only under pressure that she could be brought to admit that some of the delicacies were really the work of her own hands.

Once started, the supper went on gayly. The doctor led Merrick on to tell some of his experiences as a pioneer in the Far West, a life which seemed so unreal, so far removed from anything his hearers had ever known. It was *his* subject; one on which he was perfectly at home.

Once embarked upon it, he talked modestly and well. And while he addressed himself rather pointedly to Mrs. Horton, who listened with marked appreciation, he was by no means unconscious of the flush that the narration of some of his thrilling escapes—all part of the day's work to the true frontiersman—brought to his lady-love's face, or of the new light that it brought to her eyes. Is it to be wondered that, like Othello in the same circumstances, he outdid himself in the matter of eloquence?

After supper, they all gathered on the little porch, deliciously fragrant with the perfume

that came to them from the garden lying beyond, cool and mysterious.

Again the doctor proved himself a self-obliterating friend, anxious to show his companion in the best possible light. It was he who took up the parable this time. But his theme was the new hospital, and Merrick's generous offers regarding it.

"Shall I tell them how you characterized my hesitations?" he asked mischievously.

"If you do, I'll—I'll break your neck!" said Merrick threateningly. He felt his face crimson in the darkness.

Of course all the women were curious to know just what he had said, Mary most of all. But the doctor pretended to be completely intimidated. All they could get out of him was that Merrick's strictures had had to do with what he believed to be a characteristic weakness peculiar to Great Falls and its people.

In the midst of the doctor's recital, Mary had given a little startled exclamation, and stooped over to pick up some object from the floor.

"What is it?" whispered Merrick.

"Nothing," she answered in the same low tone. But she had carefully wrapped the retrieved object in her handkerchief. She leaned over, and whispered something in her mother's ear.

"Certainly not!" said Mrs. Horton, with even more than her wonted energy.

"I can guess what that suggestion was," laughed the doctor. "I was about to make it myself."

"Well, you needn't back her up!" Mrs. Horton assured him. "A person would think the way you two go on, that I was a baby, or had lost my faculties!"

Everybody laughed at this. For it was perfectly apparent that Mary had suggested the propriety of her mother's retiring to take her after-supper nap. Finally, on her guests' threatening immediate departure unless she consented to take at least "forty winks," she yielded, and went into the house, albeit with not the best grace in the world.

It was Mary who proposed that they all go out into the garden. The others were not slow in acquiescing. The doctor and Hilda strolled the length of the central path, finally seating themselves on a bench removed as far as possible from the one on which Willy had had his seizure. Mary and Merrick, whose associations with it were neither so poignant nor so personal, finally came back to it.

"Do you realize how long the time has been since I have seen you?" he asked.

"That hasn't been altogether my fault, has it?" she asked in turn.

"I have been away, you know. I was in New York for a few days, and then I was called to Montreal on business."

"Did—did you see—anyone in New York?"

"No one you ever knew. I went there to meet one of my old Canadian friends who had run down from the woods on his first visit. He sent me a wire imploring me to join him. I couldn't very well refuse for old time's sake. It was well I did. He was positively frightened by the bustle and the noise. And as for the traffic! He wouldn't even trust me. I always had to call a policeman to get him across the street."

"Had he never been in a city before?"

"He'd never seen anything like New York. I think he's glad he went. But I don't think anything would ever tempt him to try it again."

She made no further comment, and after a moment he went on.

"I tried to find Polly. I telephoned her twice, and finally I went up to the place early one afternoon. I didn't want to see Joe or Morgan. Did you know she had gone?"

"Yes, Hilda heard from her just once, when she sent on her things. Did you learn that Polly and Joe had gone abroad?"

"No. If the hallboy knew it, he didn't tell me. Poor Polly! Mary, do you think she cares for Joe?"

"N-o-o," said Mary slowly. "At least he has no part in the dream she has for the future. She told me all about it when she was here. I don't think she'd mind my telling it to you."

There was a suggestion of intimacy in this which he found most encouraging. When she had finished the tale of Polly's simple ambitions, he said again: "Poor little Polly. We" —he checked himself in embarrassment. But as she made no move to correct him, he went on boldly. "We must help her when the time comes."

"Yes," said Mary simply. "I should like to. If only we know when and how to do it."

"I haven't thanked you for the roses," she said, after a moment. "But you mustn't keep on sending them. It frightens me to think of the money it takes. But I have never had anything so beautiful done for me before. You are too generous."

"I'm not generous at all," he protested stoutly. "I sent them out of pure selfishness. I wanted you to think of me at least once every day while I was gone. Did you?"

"How could I help it, when those lovely things came every morning?"

"Mary! Haven't you made up your mind to forgive me for what, after all, was only my clumsiness?"

"I forgave you for that long ago."

"Then you *will* marry me?"

"Please don't! I don't want to marry anybody. Why can't we stay just good friends?"

"No, that we can't do," he said firmly. "What do you think a man's made of! When he's in love with a woman and wants to marry her, do you think he can content himself with being 'just a friend'?"

She had no answer ready.

"I am more than willing to give you time to think it over. But, remember, I can't stay here forever."

"I thought you were so interested in the new hospital," she murmured.

"So I am. But I don't expect to shut myself up in it like a monk in a monastery. I'm not planning to die there!"

From the bench in the far end of the garden, Hilda and the doctor could be seen moving slowly towards the house.

"Perhaps we'd better go in. The others are coming."

"Aren't you going to give me one word of hope?"

"How can I?" she asked with a trace of real passion. "How can I forget how, and under what circumstances, you were forced to offer yourself?"

"I was *not* forced. What could have forced

me? Surely not that miserable cur, Horace Worth!"

"Your pity forced you. Your pity for my mother, your pity for me. I do not mean to be cruel, believe me, I don't. But in the short time you have known me, you have already changed your mind about me once. How can I be sure that you will not change again?"

"I have never changed my mind about you since once I realized that I loved you!"

"I think you are forgetting that when you came up here after me, it was not with the idea of taking me back with you as your wife."

Merrick groaned.

"I confessed that to you. I was ready—am ready now—to beg your pardon on my knees. I was mad. I didn't understand the situation. I thought you were like the other women we knew. Women don't understand such madness in men. That's why they find it impossible to forgive it."

"I think I understand it—a little. I haven't forgotten the night that I was mad, and you tried to save me. Only I wouldn't let you."

"Then what is it that still keeps us apart?"

"My fear that the day will come when you will realize, as I do now, that pity was your impelling motive. My fear that the day will come when you will meet some other woman

whose purity you would never think of questioning—as you once did mine."

"Mary, Mary! You do us both wrong. Give me time, and I will convince you."

She shook her head sadly. "I don't know how you ever could convince me," she said.

"By showing you how I myself have changed; how sincere I am in my repentance. Only give me time. Be fair to me."

"I will give you until the autumn. Only"—she held up a warning finger—"you must not speak of the subject again until then. Promise me?"

"I promise you," he said humbly.

They followed the doctor and Hilda, who had chosen a roundabout path, into the house. As they got up from the bench, Merrick saw a tiny ball which proved to be a handkerchief lying at Mary's feet. Without a word, he put it in his pocket.

They found Mrs. Horton wide awake once more. But, having looked at his watch, the doctor announced that it was time for all good people, well and ill, to be in bed. At Mrs. Horton's renewed protests, he threatened to use his influence to have the curfew revived in Great Falls as a last desperate means of controlling recalcitrant patients.

In his own room later on, Merrick took out the little rolled-up handkerchief to examine it

at his leisure. It contained a single rosebud, broken off sharply at the stem. It was the one she had worn in her hair the beginning of the evening. It was that, then, that had fallen on the porch when she had given that little outcry.

Somehow, its contemplation brought comfort to his heart.

CHAPTER XIX

On the whole, the summer passed more quickly than Merrick would have believed possible. That does not mean that there were not periods when for days at a time he did not have the feeling that it would never come to an end; but, particularly in looking back over it, he realized that it had really seemed shorter than any year he could remember since he had been actively at work.

This was largely due to the fact that once more he had found occupation for his active mind, as well as a certain amount of physical work out of doors for which he had long unconsciously craved. He constantly recalled, with an ever-growing wonder, the manner in which he had been content to pass the previous summer idling about New York. How could he have endured it! And more inexplicable still, how could he have fancied that he was enjoying himself! That sort of thing might be all very well for men of Willy Morgan's age and temperament, but for a man still well without the shadow of middle-age, a man with red blood in his veins, it would be impossible for any length of time, if he were to keep sane.

To be sure, Joe Garfield was no older than he. But then Joe was a creature apart. He no more represented the average American man than did a freshly landed Chinaman.

His friend, Atwater, the architect, had run down from Montreal a few days after Mrs. Horton's tea-party. The doctor had naturally insisted on his not braving the horrors of the Palace Hotel, so he too had come to stop with him. This gave the three men a better opportunity of going over the whole question of the hospital than they would otherwise have had. And Merrick was glad to see that he and the doctor took to each other frankly and naturally.

"Your doctor's a fine fellow, after you break through that shy pride of his," Atwater confided to his friend.

"He's one of the best," Merrick agreed. "Only you've got to know him."

At Merrick's suggestion, a meeting of all those who had already subscribed to the hospital fund, supplemented by a number of people whom the doctor still hoped to interest, was called at the doctor's home, ostensibly for the purpose of having an informal talk with the Canadian architect on the probable cost of such a building as they hoped to erect. Merrick had given his friend a few pointers on the best manner in which to present the case.

"I've a notion that they're what you might

call 'gun-shy,' when it comes to coming across,'' he remarked. ''So be as easy as you honestly can. Simpson says that there are one or two who could build the whole works and never know they'd done it. But they're sort of bashful about doing it. He has a ridiculous notion of doing the most of it himself, but I don't intend to let him. If he knows what's best for him, he'll have other uses for his little pile than putting it into any charity that doesn't begin at home. If the worst comes to the worst, remember you can call on me. But that is strictly on the Q. T. for the present. Remember!''

''I'll remember,'' agreed Atwater. And then he added with seeming irrelevance: ''That young woman who is thinking of becoming a nurse when we get the thing going is a mighty interesting person. Only I think she's making a mistake in her mission.''

''Exactly. You've guessed it the very first time,'' grinned Merrick.

''There's another thing I could guess if I tried hard enough,'' remarked his friend dryly.

''And you'd be right—as far as I'm concerned.''

From which cryptic conversation it may be inferred that Atwater had not only met the two young ladies with whom this story is chiefly

concerned, but that he had the habit of using his eyes to good purpose outside of business hours.

The meeting was a great success, far surpassing the doctor's most sanguine hopes. A fact which he gratefully attributed to Atwater's shrewdness and tact in presenting his case.

He began by complimenting the gentlemen present on their wisdom and taste in selecting the site for the proposed building. He commended them warmly, without a hint of patronage, for the public spirit and local pride they disclosed in planning to found an institution which, though small, should represent the last word in beauty, utility, and scientific equipment. He ended by expressing the hope, and he frankly confessed in doing so that he was not wholly disinterested, that their example might be largely followed in other communities throughout the land.—Which peroration was received with laughing appreciation.

The doctor closed the meeting with a few remarks in his usual direct and earnest manner, and made known Merrick's offer to undertake the general direction of the work without pay. The fact that he had finally given his consent to his making up whatever deficit there might be after all the subscriptions were in, he kept to himself for the present.

It was further explained that Merrick had come to Great Falls with the simple intention of passing the summer. But having become greatly interested in this, the doctor's pet project, he was prepared to dedicate his ample leisure to help carrying it through.

All who had not already subscribed were invited to fill out pledges for whatever amount they felt they cared to give. To the doctor's gratification, not a man present but showed a desire to give something. Moreover, some of the pioneer subscribers added to their subscriptions, and many even volunteered to lay the matter before friends who had not been sufficiently interested to attend the meeting.

Merrick was a strong believer in the doctrine of striking while the iron was hot. As a consequence, a few days later those who happened to drive past the ground where the hospital was ultimately to stand were encouraged to see a force of men already engaged in clearing the ground.

As is always the case, once that the hospital seemed to be an assured fact, there were a number of those careful citizens who never like to associate themselves with any movement until it looks like a success who espoused the cause as enthusiastically as if the whole idea had originated with them. Anyone who happened to drop into the bar of the Palace a few weeks

after the meeting would have found it difficult to decide just which of the many of the philanthropists who made that resort their headquarters deserved the credit of fathering the scheme.

Quite naturally, without any appearance of following an organized plan, Merrick drifted into the habit of dropping into the Hortons', if only for a moment every day. Sometimes he only stopped at the gate to exchange a word or two with Mrs. Horton who passed a number of hours every day either sitting out on the porch or in the garden.

Often he saw the two girls, who, when they had finished whatever tasks they had to do in the house, brought their sewing or their books out of doors. For the time being, Hilda was devoting all of her leisure time to studying the various books on hospital work and nursing with which the doctor had provided her.

The project of her taking a preliminary course in some of the great hospitals of the city had been discussed and abandoned. For the moment, she seemed to have a morbid horror of cities. While her health was better than it had been for years, both the doctor and Mrs. Horton, who frequently consulted together on many of his cases, as he always declared, decided that she was unquestionably better where she was. And certainly Hilda looked both con-

tented and happy. After all, she could get her experience gradually after the hospital opened. They would, naturally, begin in a small way.

The bargain which he had made with Mary was strictly kept on Merrick's side. He sometimes wondered if she realized how hard were the conditions she had imposed. If she did, she gave no sign. Her manner to him on all occasions was simple and friendly, without any trace of self-consciousness. But occasionally Merrick thought that he detected in her bright and candid eye a faint suggestion that she was fully alive to the torments she was inflicting—and was finding a certain enjoyment in the knowledge. If he came to the conclusion that all women—even the best of them—had an underlying strain of cruelty in their compositions, he was not the first young man to arrive at that decision.

From their different angles of vision, both Hilda and Mrs. Horton watched the progress of this love affair with equal interest. To see Mary well and happily married was the dearest wish of her mother's heart. She felt that she, herself, in spite of the fact that she was in better health than she had been for years, was hanging onto life by a thread which might snap at any moment. The doctor appreciated her brave spirit sufficiently to tell her the truth. She could never hope to be well. Her disease

was incurable. But care and watchfulness against overexerting herself might prolong her days indefinitely.

She would have been perfectly content, if only she could have felt that Mary's future was assured. She knew, none better, the dangers of a temperament like hers. She did not want to leave her without a protector. Often she had been tempted to speak to her about Merrick. Never since the evening of their first conversation had she faltered in her belief that he was a good man. She could not have wished for a better husband for her only child, *if*—there was always this if—Mary loved him. But remembering that she had once made the mistake of urging Horace Worth's suit, she felt a hesitancy about using her influence again. That she had made a grave mistake the other time, she humbly acknowledged.

But the conviction that Mary was really in love this time grew with her with each succeeding day. Even age cannot dim a mother's eyes when it comes to reading the hearts of her children. There were any number of signs which a mother could read in Mary's telltale face. It had resolved itself into a struggle between her love and her pride. Which would eventually win? Mrs. Horton could not tell. But she was resolved not to interfere until the last moment.

And Hilda, too, watched, hoped, and waited. She had the same hesitancies as Mrs. Horton. If only Mary would confide in her. But Mary was too self-confident to confide in anyone. And if she were to open the subject, to try to force this reluctant confidence, who knew what harm she might do?

She had never spoken to Mary of her own love affair. She was not of the confiding sort any more than Mary. And she had the feeling as well, that that sad story was not entirely hers to tell. If she could have told it without betraying the fact that the object of her hopeless passion was Doctor Simpson, she would gladly have sacrificed herself, and thrown all reticence to the winds. But Mary knew.

For at last Hilda had realized that, in her case, too, pride had been her undoing. Pride had whispered in her ear that she was neglected and forgotten; that some fresh love had entered into his heart; that she had been only the object of his boyish fancy. And Pride had counseled her to show him that there were others who could appreciate and value her. And in her hurt pride she had gone away.

If Mary's case was not the same, it at least resembled hers in that she was in danger of losing the greatest thing that could come into the life of a woman through the same pride.

And still Hilda hesitated like Mrs. Horton, and like her, resolved to wait a little longer.

The doctor was also a frequent visitor, but that was nothing new to him. Only where formerly his visits were nearly always of a professional character and confined almost entirely to seeing Mrs. Horton, he now came without any excuse, unless his interest in Hilda's progress with her studies might be accepted as one. But it was curious how little he found to say on the subject once he was there.

The two men understood and sympathized with each other. Between them there was no need of words. Each had his problem to solve, and understood that whatever the outcome, he could perfectly rely on the other's acceptance of the result. Of the two, however, it was Merrick who was the more restive. As the summer waned, his face assumed a grim expression which the doctor noted with concern. Often they sat facing each other throughout dinner without uttering a word. At times Merrick would awake to a consciousness that he was anything but a cheerful companion.

"Look here!" he said one night as they were getting up from the table. "I'm not fit company for man or beast! Why don't you pack me off to the hotel? I'd be the last person to blame you."

"Maybe it's because I think it would be a

little too rough on the cheerful society at the Palace. I'm an unselfish creature, you know."

"I confess I hadn't thought of that side of it. But I'm sure I'm sorry. I could kick myself for acting like a baby! But I might as well admit that I'd rather get my walking papers, and be done with it, than have this damned uncertainty!"

"Rot!" said the doctor, with brief inelegance.

"I tell you I would!" retorted Merrick hotly. "I never was much of a hand at hanging round."

"Still you agreed to do it, didn't you?"

"I didn't agree to do it forever!"

"Forever!"

A sad little smile flickered over Doctor Simpson's face. He crossed over to the mantel and got his favorite pipe.

"My boy," he said, as he stood packing down the tobacco in the bowl with his thumb, "you don't know what waiting is. Forever! Why you've only been at it a few months!"

Merrick made an impatient gesture. "Ah!" he exclaimed. "But you are wonderful! I could never have your patience."

Together they went out of the house and mechanically took the road that lead to Mrs. Horton's house. They had reached the gate without having exchanged a word, when they

both looked up. It was impossible to keep back a laugh.

"Behold the insidious effect of habit!" said the doctor.

"It's the most jesuitical thing in the world!" agreed Merrick.

They were all seated on the porch. Mrs. Horton in her great arm-chair, to which she was beginning to become attached, Sadie on the doorstep, and Hilda and Mary on the steps leading up to the porch.

It had been an overcast, gusty day, a foretaste of fall. To-night the sun was sinking behind a bank of crimson clouds. The two girls moved over to make room for the young men. After exchanging the ordinary salutations, no one seemed to have anything to say. It was Merrick who broke the silence with a laugh.

"Well, doctor, we seem to be continuing the same interesting conversation we were having at dinner. We could have done *this* at home!"

"Conversation?" questioned Mary. "Why, you haven't said a word since you came up the steps!"

"Exactly!" agreed Merrick. "That's what we've been doing all through supper."

"It sounds awfully gay!" said Hilda.

"You young men are getting into bad habits, I fear," warned Mrs. Horton.

"My dear, in your heart, do you really want him to go?"

"*Young* men? You don't call *me* a young man, surely? Why, I'm gray-haired!" said the doctor.

"I call all unmarried men young!"

"Oh, mother!" remonstrated Mary. "Think of old Hughy Green; he's seventy, if he's a day!"

"I never could see why people objected to getting old," said Merrick slyly. "I don't, for one."

This was too much for Sadie's composure. With an ill-suppressed giggle, she retired hastily into the house. Even in the darkness, Mary was sure that they could see that she was blushing.

"Oh, see!" she cried, wishing to create a diversion. "The jasmine has come out at last. I never knew it to be so late. Come, doctor; I'm sure the blossoms are larger than yours. I mean the one that grows on your side porch."

She ran down the path towards a little arbor in the center of the garden.

"Come, Hilda," said the doctor. "Shall we go and see if she is right?"

"Mary has remarkable eyes," said Merrick dryly, when he and Mrs. Horton were left by themselves. "My eyes have always been considered fairly good. And I couldn't distinguish a blossom at this distance!"

"Y-e-s. Her eyes *are* good. She's very like

her father in that. But in some ways, I could wish that she might see more clearly."

Her own eyes were fastened on the young man's face. He leaned forward and took her old hand in his own.

"Mrs. Horton," he said, "I have much to thank you for. I have always known that you are on my side. But I am almost discouraged. Tell me what to do. I have been thinking of going away."

"Have you told Mary?"

"No. Not yet."

"I think I'd tell her, if I were you."

"Then you approve of my going?" There was a certain dismay in his tone.

She gave his hand a little pat with her other one.

"I didn't say *that,*" she said with her wise, little smile. "I said: 'If I were you, I'd tell her.'"

"By Jove!" he said. "I see what you mean. I'll do it!"

And he ran down the path towards the others.

CHAPTER XX

At the sound of his steps, the doctor and Hilda turned slowly away. Apparently their interest in the jasmine was exhausted.

"I don't think the doctor's quite fair," said Mary, glancing up. "I'm sure he knows that our flowers are finer. But he pretends that he couldn't decide the question without first comparing them. He knows that's impossible. His has finished blooming. I can't think why this one is so extraordinarily late, unless Sadie cut it back too much last year!"

"Mary," he said, "I am going away."

"Is your work at the hospital all done?"

"No. But it can go on perfectly well without me. It always could have. There are places where I am needed more. I am beginning to see that I am not needed here by anyone."

"The doctor will miss you tremendously. We—we will all miss you, I'm sure."

Her tone was one of complete detachment.

"You are very good!" he said bitterly.

He waited a moment for her to say something more.

"Mary! Have you no word for me? Have you forgotten our agreement?"

Her face was turned away from him. He could not see the tears in her eyes. But her mouth was set in a firm line.

"Our agreement was that you were not to say anything of this sort to me yet. You were to give me time to—to think of it."

"Mary! That is not worthy of you, nor fair to me. You have had all summer to think things over. Do you mean to say that you have not decided in your heart?"

She shook her head.

"Then there is no use in my waiting longer. What would I gain by staying on the week or two that is left before the summer is really over? You must give me my answer now."

"Not yet," she repeated stubbornly.

"That is your last word?"

"I can't say anything more yet."

"Very well. I must tell the others."

If he saw the little gesture that she made to recall him, he paid no attention to it, as he started down the garden. After a moment, Mary went slowly up the path towards the house.

They were so engrossed in each other that they did not hear him coming. And he, for his part, was too occupied with his own bitter

thoughts to notice the start they gave at the sound of his voice.

"Doctor! Hilda!" he began, and stopped.

One look at their radiant faces told the story. He was too generous not to forget his own troubles on the instant.

"Doctor! Hilda!" he exclaimed again. "I'm so glad!" And he held out a hand to each.

"And you?" questioned Hilda. "Is all well with you, too?"

"I am leaving to-morrow," he said briefly.

Hilda gave a little cry. "Don't! Wait just a little longer. Give her a little more time. Rob, I know she cares for you. Trust another woman to know that. I wouldn't say so unless I were sure."

"I used to think so, too," he said gloomily. "Now I am going to tell Mrs. Horton."

The doctor made a move to go to the house, but Hilda checked him with a touch on the arm.

"Wait a little," she said. And she pointed to where Mary stood by the steps.

"Well, Mrs. Horton," he said, as he came up to her, "I have come to say good-by, and thank you for a great deal!" Once more he took her hand in his own. But she hardly looked at him.

"Mary!"

"Yes, mother," said Mary, turning towards her.

"You remember the story I have so often

told you about your grandfather and the 'Fool's Gold'? And how I have always said that it showed that we must be sure that the thing we choose is the thing we want? You must choose to-night, Mary, between pride and love, and it's hard for me to let you make a mistake. I gave you your life, but you've got to live it for yourself."

"But, mother, you don't understand! You never have understood!"

"Maybe not. All I want is to be perfectly sure that you do. If you love him, nothing else matters. If you don't, then he'd better go."

"Ah!" said Merrick, "haven't I told you that you were very good and very, very wise!"

She gave a little, light laugh, and started to go into the house to leave them alone together.

"No, no! Don't go. I want your help still. She knows how keen your eyes are. Look at me again, and tell her if she can trust me."

Mrs. Horton gave him a long look. Then she turned and looked at her daughter.

"My darling! In your heart, do you really want him to go?"

"Not if—if he wants to stay!"

And her face wore the same expression that Hilda's had done.

THE END

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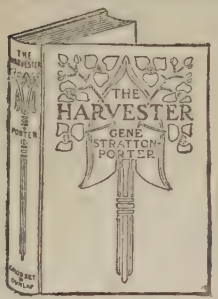

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